INDIGENIST MOBILIZATION:

'IDENTITY' VERSUS 'CLASS' AFTER THE KERALA MODEL OF DEVELOPMENT?

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Cover photo: AGMS activist and Paniya workers at Aralam Farm, Kerala (© Luisa Steur, 2006)

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by

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STATEMENT

I hereby state that this dissertation contains no materials accepted for any other degrees in any other institutions. The thesis contains no materials previously written and/or published by another person, except where appropriate acknowledgment is made in the form of bibliographical reference.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis analyses the recent rise of "adivasi" (indigenous/tribal) identity politics in the South Indian state of Kerala. It discusses the complex historical baggage and the political risks attached to the notion of "indigeneity" in Kerala and poses the question why despite its draw-backs, a notion of indigenous belonging came to replace the discourse of class as the primary framework through which adivasi workers now struggle for their rights. The thesis answers this question through an analysis of two inter-linked processes: firstly, the cyclical social movement dynamics of increasing disillusionment with - and distantiation from - the class-based platforms that led earlier struggles for emancipation but could not, once in government, structurally alter existing relations of power. And secondly, the political-economic processes associated with "neoliberalism" that changed the everyday working lives of subaltern groups in Kerala in such as way as to make them more amenable to indigenism than to the older forms of "class-based" mobilization. Through an analysis of these processes, this thesis makes a critical contribution to the wider debate on the causes and meanings of the global rise of indigenous identity politics at this juncture in the capitalist world system.

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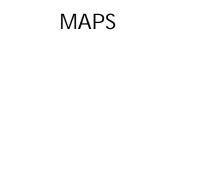
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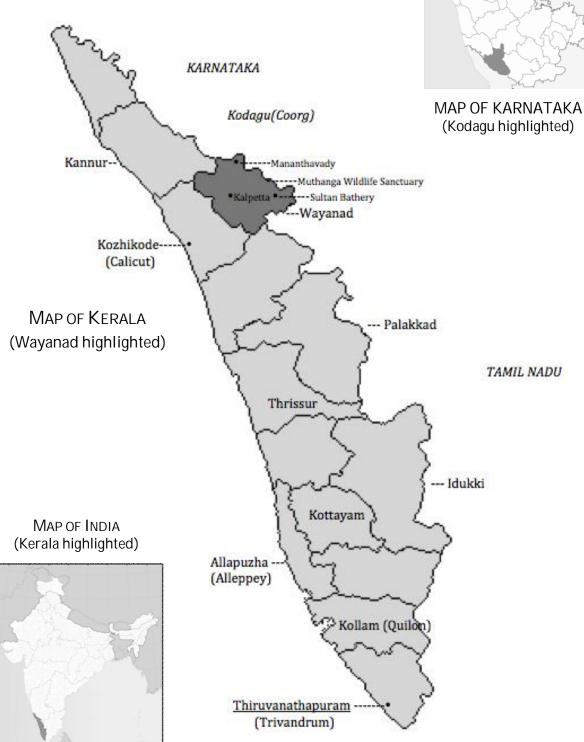MAP OF KARNATAKA
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MAP OF KERALA
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(Kerala highlighted)

PART 1

INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER 1

RESEARCH IN/ON & BEYOND THE CAPITALIST WORLD SYSTEM

In January 2003, a large group of landless people gathered in an area of depleted forestland, the "Muthanga wildlife sanctuary", in one of the hilly, northern districts of Kerala, and started settling there to claim the land. Most of them had taken everything they owned with them but that just meant a few pots to cook in and some plastic bags with clothes and memorabilia. They were planning to start a new life at Muthanga, on a piece of land to call their own -- for despite the historical promises of many Kerala governments that agricultural workers were to own at least the plot of land their homes stood on, this had never materialized for them. At this event, it was not however their poverty or the government's broken promises to agricultural workers that they talked about: it was the fact that they had indigenous, "adivasi" rights and that it was to reclaim the land and lifestyle of their ancestors that they occupied the land. Theirs was not a statement of wanting to become emancipated, full citizens of Kerala – less so to be "uplifted" into the "mainstream" of society. It was a statement of autonomy and cultural pride – in any case by those who had taken the lead in organizing the occupation. One and a half month later, the occupiers were evicted from the area by a massive police force that left little intact of the new life people had hoped for. When I first arrived in Kerala in August of 2003, it wasn't only the participants in the occupation who were still deeply impressed by the events: the whole of politically active Kerala (which is almost to say the whole of Kerala) was still debating the issues it had raised. Was Kerala, a society that prided itself on being "progressive", that had seen the most radical land reforms in the whole of India, where everyone had the chance to a decent wage, education, and health care, loosing out to "globalization"; was it corrupted and no longer supportive of general well-being? Or had its model of development never been supportive of this group of people, of "adivasis"? Was "identity politics" then the way forward – was it a good thing? Was it dangerous?

I became interested in the issues raised in this debate and how they could shed light on the more general question of why in many regions of the world, people who earlier struggled for emancipation, social integration and even socialism turned to more culturally and autonomy-oriented indigenist politics in the last decades of the twentieth century. I wanted to understand, in other words, how peasants and workers had become indigenous people. This question has attracted attention in Latin America – certainly in areas where there is a strong continuity

between socialist and indigenous organizing - but less so in India. By studying how and why the shift happened in Kerala, a state once known as one of the greatest success stories of democratic socialism in the world, I want to sharpen our understanding of the mechanisms producing the global rise of indigenism. I hence situate my research on the Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha, the new indigenist movement that arose in Kerala in the course of the 1990s and organized the land occupation at Muthanga, *in* the capitalist world system but also try to see what social processes unfolding in Kerala in turn indicate about this global complex of relations. And I do so in light of the urgency of transcending the capitalist world system – of recognizing sources of praxis that may do more than create "bastions of socialism" in the peripheries of global capitalism but also do not fall back on the image of "500 years of indigenous resistance" as islands of hope representing people who have managed to always swim against the tide, have somehow refused to become part of the world's proletariat, and now are miraculously going to push back the power of centuries of accumulated capital. If anything, it is in the synthesis of indigenist and socialist thinking and action that I see a "space of hope" and it is therefore precisely at this intersection that I have undertaken my research in/on and beyond the capitalist world system.

In this opening chapter I lay out my research program and the main methodological insights that I gained during this project. The research program, which at the same time structures the lay-out of this dissertation, consists of three main aims. Firstly, to break the reifying – and daily rehearsed – boundaries between people supposedly "in" and people supposedly "outside" the capitalist world system and, worse, the mapping of this division onto culturally or regionally holistic divides. I spend part 2 of this dissertation trying to deconstruct such reifying categorizations that have historically stood in the way of more relational, contextual and contested readings of how people come to be known as "indigenous" or not. Secondly, rather than speak of "indigenous resurgence" where indigenous people who were previously struggling for their emancipation as peasants or workers instead turn to their indigeneity for inspiration, my aim is to be clear that the rise of indigenism is a formal rather than a substantive phenomenon and that hence what needs explanation is not why indigenous people rebel but why they have started doing so under an indigenist political program. I spend parts II and III of this dissertations trying to answer precisely this question. My final aim, then, is to consider what all this can mean for praxis – for the possibility of human intervention in the capitalist logic we seem locked in that creates islands of wealth amongst cyclically returning wide-scale violence, dispossession, and hunger. After having tried to read history against the grain and come up with a more realistic interpretation of the world-historical processes that have lead to the rise of indigenism, I return in my epilogue to indigenism as a social movement to ask how it may contribute to a different understanding -- and reality -- of the world system today.

After discussing these theoretical questions in more detail in the first part of this chapter, I spend the second half discussing two main methodological questions: the issue of how to connect local observation to insights on what is going on in the world today in a manner that can best discover sources of praxis; and the question of how to deal with the basic dilemma (and attraction) of social science that we as researchers are very much part of the world we study.

1.1   SEEING LIKE A MARXIST: THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO INDIGENISM

The present research project works loosely within a Marxist tradition but not because I want to "prove" a particular, "correct" Marxist theory. My engagement with Marxism is not about finding ultimate verities, nor about "applying it correctly" as if Marxist theory were "an ointment that one might rub in the wrong place" (Arundhati Roy 2010). It is instead about borrowing from and sharpening concepts developed within this tradition as intellectual tools. My commitment does not mean I think there is any historical or social situation that can be explained only by Marxist theory. We can compare theories and see where their logical conclusions lead; we can make explicit what the merits and potentials are of different theories. We can try to expand theories to overcome their weaknesses and open them up where they have accumulated too much unquestioned baggage. But it is impossible to "prove" that only one theory explains a particular situation since the very act of distinguishing "facts" relies on one's theoretical lenses and is ultimately an ontological choice.

What I want to do in my dissertation is merely to demonstrate the social relevance of insights gained through Marxist theory. I am particularly interested, moreover, in the key Marxist concept of class as the social relationship of humans to nature and in turn to each other that forms the driving force behind the sum of relations in the world system as well as the key axis in the struggle against its determinations. This basic premise is not the same as some popular understandings of class analysis as postulating that history, culture, gender, race, the state, nations, or the family – to name but a few key sites of the reproduction and accumulation of relations of power – do not matter. The latter are all key mechanisms through which class relations are produced and reproduced and without which capitalism would probably not be able to function. The prediction by some Marxists that in capitalism eventually such "super-structural" phenomena would melt into thin air as a proletariat and a bourgeoisie polarize into pure forms has been amply refuted. This also means that class struggle in and beyond a capitalist world system may well have to constantly take place along shifting socio-historical

axes of inequality of gender, race, or nation and in confrontation with the various key institutions that deepen a capitalist logic. Class struggle need not – perhaps cannot – ever take place in "pure" form. What a Marxist perspective does is relate various social forms to class relations – theoretically understood -- within the world as a totality to thereby understand the actual ("real" as some Marxists would put it) role they play in class struggle. This is no simple exercise that Marxists sharing this basic perspective will reach equal conclusions on. Working within a Marxist research tradition far from predetermines the answers this project will produce or even the questions it poses. Let me hence introduce my research program here in more detail.

1.1.1 *THE CLAY-LIKE QUALITIES OF INDIGENEITY*

> "Would it not make more sense to try to understand peoplehood for what it is – in no sense a primordial stable reality, but a complex, clay-like historical product of the capitalist world-economy through which the antagonistic forces struggle with each other" (Wallerstein 1987: 387).

Before we can ask what explains the rise of indigenism, we need to ask what "indigeneity" stands for, how we can understand it in historical context as a particular sociological phenomenon rather than as a given, primordial reality. For if we understand indigenous peoplehood as primordial and fixed, we need not wonder at all why so many people today revolt against threats to their livelihood *as indigenous people* since that would be the only possible basis for them to do so. If, however, we see indigeneity as expressive – in various, contested ways – of a particular historical relationship, we can understand it does not simply, once and for all, map onto substantive categories of people or particular coherent geographical regions. If we moreover acknowledge how under particular circumstances it can also become the key site of resistance against the same historical processes that formed indigeneity into an axes of dispossession, it becomes all the more clear that in this capacity it is a political project rather than simply the name of a given group of people. It is however difficult to hold on to indigeneity as, in Wallerstein's words, a "clay-like historical product". Despite the emphasis many scholars put on relational analysis, this often becomes an analysis of the relationship between different categories rather than an analysis of the meaning of categories through a focus on what their relationship to each other in wider context is. This dialogical rather than dialectical approach for instance lies in Pierre Clastres' (1977: 185-86) claim that if "the history of peoples who have a history is the history of class struggle,[i]t might be said with at least as much truthfulness, that the history of peoples without history is a history of their struggle against the state" (also quoted in Scott 2009: i). On the one hand this is logical since indigenism

can be seen to stand for the struggle by an original society against a violently expanding capitalist world system. Yet in the contemporary world I would define indigenism more precisely as the struggle *on behalf of* an original society to confront its subordination to the capitalist world system. We should not ignore that this original society is not only, as Benedict Anderson (1983) would put it, an "imagined community" (and indeed *imagined* as outside of the state) but also is today almost everywhere already an integral part of the capitalist world system.

Indigenous people may maintain distinct ways of life, some of which for instance lean more towards a kin-based mode of production, but almost everywhere the surpluses of this production are ciphered off as accumulated global capital that in return gains ever greater leverage over these (and other) people's lives. Many people struggling in the name of indigenism are even more obviously part of global capitalism, not owning any means of sustaining themselves except their own body and fully dependent on selling their labor power as agricultural laborers, construction workers, mine workers etc. Many of those holding dear to an "indigenous way of life" spend their productive lives working under direct supervision from managers of capital, subjected to dealing with whatever more "efficient" production process they come up with – a situation that would count as "capitalist" even for Eric Wolf (who otherwise tends to define capitalist production not in terms of circulation of surplus value within a capitalist world system but purely in terms of the organization of the production process). Other people we consider 'indigenous' or who see themselves in similar terms meanwhile suffer from *not* having their labor power appropriated by global capital and finding themselves *dis*employed – first violently made dependent on being employed, only to then be turned into a reserve army of labor. Since this is a much more widespread reality for people identifying as indigenous than slash-and-burn agriculture in isolated forests is, it makes sense to see indigeneity not as a social phenomenon based on actually being outside of the capitalist world system but, according to Wallerstein's vision, as a particular historically evolved axis through which the appropriation of social labor by a capitalist world economy is organized as well as contested. With this I do not mean to portray indigenous people as "simply disappearing into the vast underclass of the capitalist periphery" (Lee 2006: 457) – as if social distinctions ever disappear thus – but rather to contest the essential difference that much current scholarship rehearses between indigenous people and the rest of the working world. Pierre Clastres' contrasting of people "with" and "without" history, thought obviously meant in the same vein as Eric Wolf used the phrase – i.e., in irony – perhaps accurately describes the original expansion of capitalism before the eighteenth century but is rather unhelpful in understanding present realities. What my dissertation aims to do is to pay attention precisely

to this contemporary reality. Through the case of the Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha in Kerala, I study the complexities of the many – perhaps majority of— indigenist struggles lead by people who have become an intricate part of the capitalist world system. Where it is in fact increasingly popular, not just in the rhetoric of social movements but also in academic analysis, to distinguish what James C. Scott (2009) calls "state-repellent" peoples versus state subjects, I want to think beyond this dichotomy of so-called working-classes and indigenous people. I want to disrupt this common-sense dichotomy, particularly where it is primarily a product of what Foucault called "governmentality". In chapter 2, I prepare the ground for this by discussing the notion of the "tribe-class" divide as it historically evolved, with particular attention of course to how it did so in Kerala. In chapter 3 I follow this up by tracing the more contemporary ways in which the notion of indigenous people as a politically distinct category developed in Kerala. I will here add a few words, however, on the recent history of the general debate.

Since it seems that the most counter-hegemonic challenges to the present world system are emanating from its "margins" rather than from within its core – from people indentifying as "indigenous" rather than "workers" (with the grand exception of China) – it is not surprising that from around the 1970s and increasingly so after, we have seen a passionate effort in social science to rethink history through the margins, away from Eurocentric, nation-centric, and/or state-centric views and their tendency to posit the formal working-class in core states and its struggle with capital as the main engine of history. The Subaltern Studies school that emerged in the early 1980s[1] is a major such intervention from India. Its original program was to rewrite history beyond the teleology of the Indian nation-state and hence with much more attention to the role of peasants, "tribals", and women in shaping and resisting -- and shaping by resisting -- what became known as India. Inspiration came from within the Marxist tradition and particularly the work of Gramsci[2] and E P Thompson (1970) whom both were admired for their ability to hold in dialectical tension dimensions of social life – domination and resistance, culture and economy, elite and subaltern – that so-called orthodox Marxism had by then reduced to categorical and sterile disjunctions. As Sumit Sarkar (1997), an active participant in the original initiative, argues, Subaltern Studies scholars posited the notion of the "subaltern" to help avoid the pitfalls of economic reductionism while retaining a necessary emphasis on relations of power. The notion helped analyze collectivities of protest and transformation

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[1]   The first Subaltern Studies volume came out in 1982, edited by Ranajit Guha, who also was editor of the five subsequent volumes. Contributions were mostly concerned with "peasant revolt" and "rebellious hillmen". The first explicit feminist intervention came in Volume 6 (1989) by Julie Stephens. By 2005, the twelfth Subaltern Studies volume had come out, edited by Shail Mayaram, M. S. S. Pandian, and Ajay Skaria, with an explicit focus also on Dalits and Muslims.

[2]   Gramsci's prison notebooks, written between 1926 and 1937, were edited and published in English in 1971 by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith.

without positing them in terms of fixed and reified identities. Around the same time, Eric Wolf promoted a similar critical turn in US anthropology with the publication of his seminal "*Europe and the people without history*" (1982), in which he too sought to tell a relational world history of an expanding capitalist core not just dominating but also being formed by populations and regions onto whom an imperial myth became projected that made them look "static" and hence "without history". Eric Wolf also worked within a Marxist (or, he preferred, "Marxian") tradition and placed a theoretical understanding of modes of production at the center of his analysis. Paying due attention, as the Subaltern Studies school did, to the "autonomous" (not pre-determined) development of non-European/non-hegemonic classes and communities, Wolf at the same time emphasized mutual (though unequal) conditioning within an evolving common social formation – the capitalist world system. The difference Wolf tried to make in understanding the world was to emphasize "the world as a whole, a totality, a system, instead of as a sum of self-contained societies and cultures" (1982: 385). European anthropologists meanwhile, in this same trend, were rethinking the essentialist distinctions in orthodox Marxist modes of production debates. The latter had seen the rise of capitalism in Western Europe and its subsequent hegemony over places like South Asia as explained through essential differences between the European or "feudal" mode of production and the "Asian mode of production" that had supposedly dominated the history of Asia and, unlike feudalism, entailed an absolute incapacity for innovation. Rethinking this debate lead to more relational historical theories explaining Europe's dominance as a question of uneven and combined development.

This post-1968 generation of scholars working to revitalize Marxist theory and critique its creeping dogmatism – working in tandem with a generation of political activists pursuing similar aims in terms of struggling for socialism yet against Stalinism – differs significantly from the contemporary scholarly project that latently builds on relational-historical Marxism but frames their exercise as one of criticism (rather than critique) of Marxist theory. As Sumit Sarkar (1997) has noted, on the trail of the Subaltern School there came a tendency toward "essentializing the categories of "subaltern" and "autonomy" in the sense of assigning to them more or less absolute, fixed decontextualized meanings and qualities" (1997: 304). We can see this move towards emphasizing the autonomy of indigenous people also in the work of James Scott, whose work the 1970s and 80s by in contrast so clearly showed how state subjects – in his case Malaysian peasants struggling with the polarizing effect so the Green Revolution – in fact have myriad ways of retaining a sense of autonomy under a surface of symbolic compliance. In his most recent work (Scott 2009) on the people inhabiting upland Southeast Asia ("Zomia"), he however maps class struggle and struggle against the state (for "autonomy") onto distinct geographical areas and types of peoples. Though he admits that his analysis of Zomia is based

on more distant history and that the distinction may be approaching an end, the argument that emerges is increasingly popular in contemporary indigenous studies. Indigenous, state-repellent peoples and state subjects are hence related in that they produce each other but not in the sense that they are part of a totality across which an accumulation of power – affecting them both – takes place. It is likewise popular to -- as Scott does in his latest work -- see indigenous, highland societies as conscious choices of avoiding the state. Yet this is not all that different a story (simply a more assertive version) from the hegemonic one positing these zones and their inhabitants as remnants of a tribal culture in need of either protection or "uplift". Both ignore the role of the state itself in defining indigeneity within its sphere of influence for its own interests.

Though Scott explicitly proposes a "relational" analysis, the relationality lies in that it connects categories and studies the organization of social labor within these categories. He does not, however, study the ways in which social labor is mobilized and appropriated across these categories. If we look at indigenous people from the latter perspective, we see that most indigenous areas and people are seeing their social labor alienated and its value flowing towards an ever-expanding pool of global capital, managed through state power. Hence indigeneity becomes a particular axis of inequality, similar to ethnicity, gender or race in constituting a way in which social labor is organized and appropriated in a global division of labor as well as, necessarily, an axis along which the struggle against this division of labor will take place. I see indigeneity not as a category outside of a capitalist world system but precisely one produced in as well as against it and hence in many ways continuous with other such categories. Indigeneity is not, to come back to the epigraph of this paragraph, a stable social reality but, like peoplehood, "a clay-like historical product of the capitalist world-economy through which the antagonistic forces struggles with each other" (Wallerstein 1987: 387). It is sustained, as Foucault (2007) suggests of race, not as an effect but as a tactic in the internal fission of society into binary oppositions. And like race and ethnicity, it has increasingly attained not just a global form but also a global content. But precisely because indigenism has come to stand for the fight against the capitalist world system as such (though it has originally also stood precisely for the struggle to impose such as system and often still functions as such), it is easily essentialized as indeed coming from outside of the system.

We can see indigenism as a struggle "within and against" global capitalism but we can also apply such a perspective, following Gerald Sider, at a more micro level where indigenous people have to live "within and against their own history and culture as well as those others try so intensely to impose on them" (2003: xiii). Note there is still a seed of essentialism in Sider's formulation in posing a dichotomy between "own" culture and that of "others" though for Sider culture is not

a particular bounded and coherent structure but rather the way in which people make sense of the contradictions of everyday life. We may thus read "others" as potentially including "indigenous" others. Returning to the global level, it is crucial to study indigenism as a struggle both against *and* within global capitalism precisely because it allows for a realistic perspective on what the struggle is about and what kind of alliances it needs. Indigeneity cannot only be an "inspiration" for others, an object through which to remind the world of the relative newness of the state and capitalism in world history – it also needs to be a position that can concretely ally with other struggles. This is not to deny, therefore, that indigeneity reflects a particular history but to open up this particularity to the necessary wider alliances. It is also a necessary perspective from which to the question I work out in the following paragraph: why increasingly indigenous people struggle *as indigenous people* while there are potentially many other identifications open to them.

1.1.2 *FRAMING MOVEMENTS: FROM CLASS TO INDIGENEITY*

> "The insurgent movements against accumulation by dispossession generally took a different political path, in some instances quite hostile to socialist politics. This was sometimes for ideological but in other instances simply for pragmatic and organizational reasons that derived from the very nature of what such struggles were and are about" (Harvey 2003: 166)

It takes the deconstruction of reified notions of indigeneity to arrive at the premise that what is usually presented as the recent "rise of indigenous societies" is in fact largely a formal shift in political subjectivity – a question of a different "framing" of political initiatives. Hence we can ask why this shift took place. In finding an answer, there are however few sources to rely on since almost all existing arguments on why we have seen a rise of indigenism in the last quarter of the twentieth century either essentialize indigenous people or ignore the existence of alternative political projects, notably socialist ones, in which indigenous people were engaged. Marc Becker is one of the few authors to have been explicit about the continuities between socialist and indigenist political initiatives in terms of people's life historiesand the trajectories of social movements. In his case, in Ecuador, he has done so as a historian, describing the process through time in detail, without however, as sociologists would, signaling key causal mechanisms. Studies that do discuss causal mechanisms, on the other hand, usually at some point or other fall into the trap of considering "workers" and "indigenous people" to be substantive differences or of simply altogether ignoring other forms of political mobilization that indigenous people were involved in. I have in stead studied the process by building on a Marxist, world-systems approach of connecting changing forms of political subjectivity and mobilization to wider global processes. David Harvey's theory of "accumulation by

dispossession", though it needs adjustment according to the processes developing in areas such as Kerala, is particularly useful in interrogating overly rosy portrayals of indigenism as the outcome of the apparently empowering, liberating side-effects of neoliberal reform. Here, I will here elaborate a bit on existing interpretations in social movement studies, the field in which most of the debate on the rise of indigenism has taken place.

Social movement studies have, after the shake-up of 1968, been divided into two broad theoretical traditions. The first, known as New Social Movements theory, developed particularly in France under the leadership of Alain Touraine. Partly in a (perhaps over-) reaction to a Communist party that held to a particularly Stalinist line, Touraine (e.g. 1981) argued that in "postindustrial" society not labor and capital but other social cleavages constituted society's central conflict, generating new identities focusing on people's "way of life", rather than economic issues, as their central focus of contention. More generally New Social Movements theory was part of the European critique developing in the turbulent 1960s of the cultural complacency and conservatism that came with two decades of steady compromises between labor and capital and that "old" labor movements and unions had become complicit with. Though idealist interpretations of Gramsci's work inspired New Social Movement theorists, Marxism more generally, and particularly its insistence on class as the fundamental antagonistic relation in capitalist society, was usually rejected. The study of indigenous movements, where undertaken in this tradition, is often more interested in the alternative cultural values of indigenous people that have inspired – and continue to inspire – the cultural critiques of European modernity than in possible continuities between indigenous social movements and socialist movements. There was little interest in the class basis of indigenous revolts since these movements were seen as precisely being about other than "class" antagonisms. Since New Social Movement theory tends to take indigeneity, as other identities, as primarily cultural rather than political, it has focused on appreciating an *emic* reading of the content of indigenist critiques. Escobar and Alvarez (1992) for instance argued that the novel forms of collective action by the "grassroots movements" of the 1980s in Latin America significantly changed the character of political culture and practice. Since New Social Movements scholars were particularly critical of the cooptive effects of discursive hegemonic frames in the West, indigenous local knowledge and culture, assumed to be outside of such hegemony, was studied in search of alternatives *to* development as "strategies to contain the Western economy as a system of production, power, and signification" (Escobar 1992: 216.). The rise of indigenism was, in this research tradition, the consequence of the grievances indigenous people had because of their different way of life and historical experience with oppressive models of development as well as with liberal democratic regimes that for instance abstract the working

of the economy from its embeddedness in nature, compartmentalize sacral polities, and reduce democracy to formal procedures.

Political Opportunity Structures or Resource Mobilization theories, inspired by the work of Charles Tilly (e.g. 1978, 1998) in the US, in contrast saw movements arising as not so much because of certain desires and discontents but because of successful mobilization processes and the existence of political openings vis-à-vis the state. This school was less concerned with critiquing the old left than with the longer historical project of defending the rationality of social movements against the idea that they should be viewed in terms of "collective behavior", as symptoms of the moral disintegration of societies. Indigenous movements were interpreted not so much as a defense of indigenous values, which presumably would have been an issue before the last quarter of the twentieth century as well, but more as a product of new transnational strategies of organizing and funding and the political possibilities created with the democratization of authoritarian and colonial regimes. Ronald Niezen's (2003) *Origins of indigenism,* for instance, emphasizes the organizational efforts of indigenous people, particularly through the UN Working Group on Indigenous People, in producing the global rise of indigenism. Niezen demonstrates that it was a lot of work to create a feeling of commonness and sameness in a category of people ('indigenous people') amongst whom in fact "the clearest expression of human diversity can be found" (2003: 2). He ties the origins of indigenism to globalization on the one hand through the threat it poses, "the destructive and assimilative forces of environmental degradation, state domination, and ethnic rivalry ... changing the world's cultural landscape", but on the other hand through the opportunities it gives indigenous people in terms of international identity-formation, international civil society and new communication technologies that ensure that globalization "is also being changed by the very tools – the legal and political tools of multiculturalism – used to surmount obstacles to autonomy (Niezen 2003: 142). This is what Terence Turner calls globalization's "cunning of history" vis-a-vis the fate of indigenous people (2007: 121). Yashar's work in Latin America on "why indigenous movements have emerged now and not before" and why they have organized "along ethnic lines to promote an explicitly indigenous agenda" (2005: 5) agrees with this from a similar Political Opportunity Structures perspective. She argues that the neoliberal restructuring that took place in Latin American countries from the late 70s onward posed a threat to the autonomy and economic viability of indigenous communities, which people had creatively managed to maintain under previous corporatist citizenship regimes, and hence motivated indigenous people to organize. Well aware that a motive is not enough to explain the rise of a movement, Yashar also stresses the necessary conditions under which indigenist

organizing could take place, namely where "transcommunity networks" exist historically and where there is an opening up of "political associational space".

The two currents of social movements theorizing are not necessarily contradictory in their explanation of indigenism. Scholars working within either of these traditions have not really answered the question of why indigenous people organize *as indigenous people.* New Social Movements research focuses on the particularly indigenous content of such resistance but pays little attention to what wider structural conditions allow for its rise. Political Opportunity Structures approaches help understand the wider structural conditions but take it for granted that the resistance that emerges is *indigenist.* To overcome this hiatus shared between the models, we may follow Charles Tilly's (1999) argument for thinking through "counterfactuals". It can help us remain aware that it is not only interesting why people organized as indigenous people but also why they did *not* do so any longer according to other models, notably that of class struggle. In the language of social movements research, and particularly that of a new synthesis between New Social Movements and Political Opportunity Structures approaches, I could put the question as one of "framing" -- a notion referring both to the ways in which collective identities arise by strategically positioning movements vis-avis existing political structures as well as to the ideological and performative practices that shape movement participants' understanding of their condition and of possible alternatives.

What I try to explain in this dissertation is why certain social conflicts have stopped being "framed" as class struggle and have instead been reinterpreted and enacted as concerning "indigeneity" – why people used to see their poverty or oppression as a result of how they were relationally positioned vis-à-vis other people but over time have instead come to see this as the result of discrimination directed at them for being of indigenous background; why social movements of the past are reinterpreted as not actually having been about left versus right, peasant and worker versus capitalist, or poor versus rich, but about non-indigenous oppressing indigenous people (Nelson 2003: 123). It is in finding an answer to this question that I engage with David Harvey's analysis of how political/ideological and more economic/structural processes have interacted in the past decades to produce shifts in the language and forms of resistance as older forms become ineffective or unfeasible. I hence pay attention to both the interpretations that activists themselves give of this process – the New Social Movement approach, if you will – and the wider structural changes that enabled this process – the focus of Political Opportunity Structures theory. Yet I do so in a more explicitly connected manner, preferring to see these two levels as what Eric Wolf (2001) described as determined by "tactical power" and "structural power". The latter concerns those processes that shape the setting in which particular political struggles are fought – the former concerns what happens in those

setting themselves. As Eric Wolf made explicit with this formulation the processes unfolding at these two levels are closely connected. In asking the question of the shift in political framing – i.e. the formal shift – from socialist to indigenism, I am moreover aware of the fact that this shift happened in a time period characterized by neoliberal restructuring. Here David Harvey's indications on how the financialization of capital and "accumulation by dispossession" may have impacted on forms of political mobilization are particularly relevant. Such a focus leads me to argue that the rise of indigenism is not only about an "indigenous" criticism of globalization or of greater possibilities for communication and organizational resources available to indigenous people but also, as I discuss in part 3 of this dissertation, about the ideological disintegration of the kind of socialist movements indigenous people had been part of earlier together with, as I discuss in part 4, political-economic changes that dispossessed many people of the material basis of perceiving themselves as worker-citizens.

1.1.3 *CRITICAL STRUGGLES VERSUS THE GLOBAL SYSTEMIC*

> "Viewing social movements as units of analysis ... risks cultural and historical abstraction. We invert this procedure, viewing struggles as units of observation, not in comparative relation to one another, but in relational to a shared political-economic conjuncture. We view them as expressing this historical moment, and their cognitive engagement is precisely with the terms of claims of this neo-liberal conjuncture" (McMichael 2010: 5).

The project Philip McMichael describes here is primarily set against the usual practice of social movements analysis, particularly in some later incarnations of Resource Mobilization theory, of studying social movements comparatively in terms of their particular attributes and efficacy. McMichael firstly argues that social movements should, as I too just advocated, be contextualized in relation to global processes ("concretized") – that in comparing their timing and efficacy we should not only look at internal characteristics but also at their position and structuring within the world system (what McMichael (2000) calls "incorporated comparison"). But what is all the more interesting about McMichael's "critical struggles" project is that it also emphasizes the dialectical counter-move of studying social movements to see what they tell us about the current conjuncture of the world system. It is hence both realistic and liberating – it studies social movements through the lens of existing theories of global capitalism but then is attentive to how social movements may change our understanding as well as the reality of existing global structures. This is above all a methodological issue that I will return to in the second part of this chapter. What I want to do here is argue for the combination of such a "critical struggles" perspective with one of the few existing theories that explicitly deals with the rise of indigenism in structural global and historical context, namely Jonathan Friedman's

global systems theory. Friedman has been one of the few to consistently call for studying indigenous movements not just within their particular national contexts but also as part of a dynamic and multiplex global system that constitutes a field of analysis that mustbe "our central focus for understanding" (1999: 391f). It must be so, according to Friedman, if we want to try and avoid repeating the tragedies of history over and over again. Yet when we look at Friedman's theory, it seems to have no doubt such repetition is exactly what we are in for: prepare for the Dark Ages is Friedman's conclusion on the classic "what is to be done" question. Hence though I agree with Friedman's call for a wide historical and geographical view, I will argue that it needs to be in dialogue with a "critical struggles" perspective to leave some space for other possible futures.

Friedman's theory goes to the heart of my efforts to try and understand the reasons for the rise of indigenism. His "global systemic anthropology" is aimed at understanding "both the world and the cultural identities and derivative discourses that are generated by the structures of that world" (Friedman 2000: 648). The contemporary globalizing world system according to Friedman should not be seen a "new era", and thereby world-evolutionary but rather as cyclical – a historical phase. The fact that from the mid-1970s capital is increasingly exported from the post-WW II centers of global hegemony – especially of course the US – is symptomatic of the kind of economic crisis accompanying a longer-term shift in hegemony that could also be seen following economic growth and expansive trade of the Mediterranean and Flanders, the Middle East, the Italian city-states, Portugal and Spain and finally Holland and England. It is, in other words, part of a long historical process of civilizational expansion and contraction regulated by a similar dynamic for the past 3,000 years (Kajsa Ekholm and Friedman and 2003). The current phase of the decline of US hegemony, like previous phases, comes with what Friedman sometimes calls "double polarization". Vertically polarization is happening in terms of class stratification in quite astounding proportions (ibid.: 10). In all countries, whether originally more egalitarian or already quite stratified, Friedman observes a notable rise in class differentiation that is part of "a combination of global shift, speedup, and the changing composition of capital" (ibid.: 11). Upward mobility for the upper echelons of society is reflected in the enormous incomes of capitalist elites who are increasingly part of a "transnational class" not just by but *for* itself. Recent official figures for India show that its 100 richest persons own an astonishing 25 percent of GDP. On the other side of the spectrum we see increasing unemployment, stagnating incomes for working classes, and increasing economic insecurity and vulnerability. Horizontally on the other hand we see a process of fragmentation relating to "the decline of modernist identification" through the nation-state as a "citizenry-based development project" to an increase in "rooted" forms of identity" (ibid: 7). Indigenization is a major

expression of this and Friedman notes that indigenous populations have increased in size since the mid-1970s "not as a matter of biology but of identity choice" (ibid.).

Indigenization is hence "a process of rooting ... not dependent upon whether or not one is indigenous in terms of standard definitions" (2000: 650). This rise of indigenous movements is an expression of a "transformation-fragmentation" process of identification in the world arena that follows the "dual process" of "a decline in centrality or hegemony in the world system.. expressed in the weakening of the nation state of the former center of the world system" ("the West") accompanied by "the disintegration of the Soviet Empire as a hegemonic structure" (ibid.: 649). Translated into Harvey's perspective, the rise of indigenism accompanies the processes of accumulation by dispossession that have resulted from the financialization of capital accompanying the struggles of US capital to remain hegemonic – a situation in which only the new rising economic hegemons of South East Asia are still actively maintaining a regime of expanded reproduction organized through the nation-state. As Friedman observes with regard to the latter, "the rising areas of the world system in East and Southeast Asia demonstrate.. an opposite rise of national and regional identities, a new modernism and a decline, often forced, of minority politics (ibid.: 649). Outside of the "core", indigenism instead represents the "disintegration of homogenizing processes that were the mainstays of the nation state" and the resulting conflict over the rights of "particular" people" (ibid.: 650).

Friedman arrives at these theories not by merely studying history onward from the French revolution, seen by many as the first socialist struggle for universal, egalitarian ideals, or from Britain's privatizing of common land and overseas expansion (partly to solve the problems created by the privatization of land; see Rediker and Linebaugh 2001) that many see as the beginning of the current capitalist world system. Instead, Friedman studies cycles of accumulation and the rise and fall of hegemonic powers in the last *three thousand* years. The decline of hegemonic power and the processes of financialization, fragmentation and violence he sees in its wake are nothing new but have occurred many times before in history. This makes Friedman's theories all the more robust. Yet, in addition to the not entirely convincing notion that the present capitalist world system goes back more than three centuries, a problem of this approach is also that it leaves little room for local, ethnographic studies to make a difference in our understanding of the world. The further we go back in history, the more we moreover need to rely on historical sources representing the victors of history. As difficult as it is to retain the contested meanings and forces driving for instance the protests of 1989 – which were certainly not, as the dominant story now goes, all about embracing liberal capitalism – it is almost impossible to discern counter-hegemonic, failed attempts at reform from centuries from which almost all documentation was done by elites only. "Reading between the lines" or "against the

grain" – something the Subaltern Studies school tried to do – can be attempted but has its limits, certainly since Friedman is a proponent of not reading people's actions as texts the way he sees Cliffort Geertz doing with "thick description" but of indeed learning about people's own interpretations. This is obviously rather difficult if we go back three thousand years in history.

A critical struggles perspective, which reads the world partly through struggles for social change – including, I would emphasize, "failed" ones – cannot rely on the past as a finished product, in which struggles that never managed to put their stamp on history as we know it today have no further meaning or consequence. Such a perspective would ignore that in light of contemporary changes, "the content of pastness necessarily constantly changes" even though "since.. pastness is by definition an assertion of the constant past, no one can ever admit that any particular past has ever changes or could possibly change" (Wallerstein 1987: 381). Though I follow Friedman's reading of the rise of indigenism as signaling a disintegrative process in the global system, I thus would like to pay more attention to the counter move of also exploring more closely how indigenism itself intervenes in these processes and thereby at the same time intervenes in established histories. A closer study of indigenism in light of the struggles that preceded it reveals that it need not be just the same old symptom of declining hegemony in the world system. The meaning of acquiring a piece of land, for instance, can signal a "back-to-the-land" – back to the Dark Ages (as Friedman would have it) – trend but it can also be read as the completion of a land reform that never happened for all social classes, coupled with an awareness of the difficulty of making a living of farming under neoliberal conditions and the need for a broader alliance that can confront global capital's grip on agriculture. Indigenism can signal disintegration when looked at from a global systems perspective but integration when studied in terms of what people are trying to accomplish on the ground. It indeed signals the collapse of the "alternative" of the Soviet Bloc and its sponsoring of socialist politics in certain pockets but with this the way for international, space-making socialism of the kind that refuses to be locked into a desperate "bastion" somewhere is all the more open. In this dissertation I hence prefer to look at the more recent, twentieth-century history, from which continuities with present-day indigenist struggles can still be directly traced.

The main issue I want to complicate Friedman's theory on is the challenge of seeing struggle as a historical force rather than just a necessary vehicle transporting inevitable changes through human history. Methodologically this is primarily a question of the Gramscian emphasis on connecting "will" and "intellect" – a project he struggled for all his life though ironically the most famous quote by Gramsci is probably what he wrote when broken under tremendously bad health in a fascist prison cell: "pessimist of the intellect, optimism of the will". The latter is something Friedman's work shows evidence of, yet I think the challenge is to go to Gramsci's

actual dialectics of will and intellect, following Marx's famous call to philosophers to start changing, rather than merely understanding, the world. This does not mean that social scientists should drop their pens and start taking to the streets but that there is a relational interconnectedness of intellectual and material processes and that hence our understanding of the world is a product of but at the same time, as McMichael emphasizes, helps *produce* social change. Hence though we need theory of the kind Friedman works out, there is no neutral and complete theory that explains the world independent of history as it evolves and as we are part of it. This dissertation is undertaken in line with Friedman's theoretical concerns but with more emphasis on "critical struggles" -- the collective efforts of building a theory to understand the world as part of changing it. The dialectical method this entails is what I turn to now in more detail, partly, in fact, in defense of the kind of theoretical work undertaken by Friedman against the other extreme of ignoring theory altogether.

1.2   THE MINEFIELDS OF METHODOLOGY: ON WALKING "CORRECTLY"

> "Methodology … is no more the precondition for fruitful intellectual work than anatomy
> is the precondition for 'correct' walking" (Max Weber in Burawoy 1989: 759).

I am not turning to an explicit discussion of methodology as a pretence that my methodology was independent of the research program I sketched above and was already fully developed when I set out for the field and, afterwards, sat down to write up my findings. As grammatical knowledge is no precondition for correct talking or knowledge of anatomy for correct walking, so also my methodological insights only developed as I was doing my research. The following is hence the description of an ongoing exercise. And in this it differs from the attempts in sociology or anthropology to derive legitimacy by using the inductive and socially isolated methods that are understood to pertain to the physical sciences – an understanding that careful historical examination of the actual practice of the "hard sciences" would have actually refuted (Burawoy 1989). One problem about such imitation of inductive methodological schemas to achieve a theory that seems merely the product, and otherwise independent of, the methodology, is that it represents an analysis of historical process that is entirely anchored in the status quo. It cannot offer the intellectual tools to connect history to the future, to transcend the limits of the present. Many currents of anthropology in India and outside it – often those most active in the knowledge production on "adivasi" populations -- continue to see themselves as needing to preserve a scientific tradition steeped in "modern" and "objective" inductive methodologies. The reasons for Indian anthropologists to adopt this scientific method, steeped in myths about the superiority of Western modern knowledge production, Kavita Philip (2003:

144) argues lie in how it enabled Indian anthropologists to transport themselves to the other side of the gulf between colonizer and colonized. Consequently, however, the gulf itself remained in tact. In is in these conditions that critical indigenist movements like the Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha continue to have little success in producing the necessary paradigm shift in the currents of anthropology most closely associated with the study of "adivasi" issues. The following methodological discussion in fact shows that the regulative principles that tend to claim the status of the "correct" scientific method are often precisely those from which ordinary people and social movements have gained the impression that science has no meaning to them or is, worse, an authoritative jargon that works as yet another oppressive force in their lives. Overcoming such methods is important in making intellectual work speak to progressive social change and vice versa. The two hegemonic regulative principles whose critique I engage with here are firstly the inductive attempt of letting the facts speak for themselves – rather than seeing facts as concrete abstractions -- and secondly the objective attempt to isolate – rather than recognize – the involvement of the researcher in the world she describes.

1.2.1 *A DIALECTICS OF DISCOVERY AND INTERPRETATION*

"By throwing up anomalies history is continually forcing the reconstruction of Marxism, leading, in turn, to the reconstruction of history but also of possible futures." (Burawoy 2009: 150)

One of the most important basic methodological questions debated in anthropology and sociology, and crucial also for my research, is of how to connect the local and the global. A consensus has formed that the holism of the self-sufficient village ethnography is grossly unsatisfactory in the contemporary world – and actually always has been. Such holism has run up against a lot of criticism in terms of the "isomorphism of space, place, and culture" (Gupta and Ferguson 1997: 7) that it assumed and the tendency it has not only to "incarcerate" natives in a particular place and under a particular cultural trope – caste hierarchy for the case of India for instance (Appadurai 1988: 37) – but also to incarcerate the anthropologist in thinking within the status quo. Many anthropologists today prefer to work from a "place-making perspective" that does not, as holistic thick descriptions do, collapse space and place by analogy and in stead sees peoples, cultures, and places as relationships shaped in time and space. Yet the methodological issues do not end here.

For from a "place-making" perspective, the question remains how to go about connecting the local and the global if not simply through analogy. One way is by taking methodology as primarily a question of modes of ethnographic practice, of "doing fieldwork" in such a way as to

reach for the global: through "multi-sited fieldwork" (Marcus 1995) or through an "ethnography of global connection" that, similar to multi-sited fieldwork, traces the global empirically according to the "travels" of for instance goods, people, ideas, organizations, or corporations. What I want to do here is make an argument for a critical realist, dialectical methodology and defend it against the more empiricist emphasis that the global should not be envisioned as a totality and should be traced only through global chains of goods, people, and ideas. I will take Anna Tsing's (2004) method of global connection as a starting point because it exemplifies how despite the desire to move away from the determinism attributed to Marxism and connect more closely to social movements, the solution of focusing on methodology *in order to dismiss theory* in fact produces the opposite.

Tsing's methodology is explicitly aimed at avoiding the universalism she attributes to theory and particularly theories of "globalization", which she sees Marxist approaches as particularly complicit with. She argues that "rather than assume we know exactly what global capitalism is, even before it arrives, we need to find out how it operates in friction" (2004: 12). In her understanding, theories that purport to grapple with the whole, the universal, and certainly those that posit a capitalist world system need to be destabilized and opened up through methodology, by tracing exactly how "universals" travel and create the ruse of universalism. This would, according to Tsing, open up the notion of globalization beyond the inevitable and unauthored process it supposedly is in Marxist theory. Ironically, however, the Marxist theorists that Tsing fails to actually mention, but amongst whom we should surely count world-systems theorists such as Immanuel Wallerstein or Terrence Hopkins, were equally convinced that methodology was crucial – more crucial perhaps even than theory. As Lukacs (1923) before them claimed in what he somewhat awkwardly styled a "defense of orthodox Marxism", Marxism's most important intervention lies not in defending a particular theory but in working with a dialectical method of connecting theory and observation. Existing Marxist theory thereby is a starting point but never an endpoint.

In the context of Tsing's rejection of Marxist – or any -- theory, I think it is useful to recall Eric Wolf's methodological intervention in the earlier postmodern turn towards Geertzian thick description and the constant deconstruction of what came to be known as "grand narratives"[3]. In reaction to this, Wolf argued that "we need to be professionally suspicious of our categories and models; we should be aware of their historical and cultural contingencies; we can understand a quest for explanation as approximations of truth rather than truth itself. But I also

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[3] For a fascinating analysis of how post-modern deconstructivist scholarship is used by Hindutva forces see Nanda (2004).

believe that the search for explanation in anthropology can be cumulative; that knowledge and insight gained in the past can generate new questions, and that new departures can incorporate the accomplishments of the past" (Wolf 2001: 386). According to Wolf, description and interpretation are not enough: anthropologists also need to provide explanations and it was frustrating to see that with the postmodern turn so much explanatory work done in anthropology was merely deconstructed without being reconstructed: new generations of anthropologists were always inventing the wheel. Hence Wolf worried that, "[a]s each successive approach carries the axe to its predecessors, anthropology comes to resemble a project in intellectual deforestation" (Wolf 20001: 397).

Postmodernism's deforestation drive has, together with Geertzian thick description, lost its appeal. Yet a new source of deforestation comes not in the guise of thick description combined with deconstruction but rather in the guise of methodological empiricism in face of "the global". I increasingly hear – with echoes in Tsing's work -- that understanding global capitalism is boring, that it brings nothing new, and that what is instead interesting is exactly how people, things and ideas travel through global networks, assemblages and chains. Hence comes the methodology of "global connection", focusing solely on how the global is constituted in and by the local and refusing the dialectical counter-move of studying how the local is constituted in and by the global. Tsing does not see this problem as she actually claims to be doing both: she says she not only studies how "powerless minorities have accommodated themselves to global forces" but also studies global forces as "congeries of local/global interaction". We still do not know how these "powerless minorities" (a strawman, obviously) came to be so in the first place and are left to assume that powerlessness and a groupness characterized by minority status were original characteristics of these people (neoliberal ideology, a propos, similarly likes to portray poverty as a primordial human condition; McMichael 2005). Tsing does not engage in what Terence Hopkins (1978) called "concretization": the effort of taking seemingly concrete things like an ethnic group, a local practice or material fact as abstractions that only make sense because of the actual "concrete" whole that they are part of. Since this whole is the "totality" of social relations, and the method of concretization can in that sense be called "totalizing", it has become so easy to dismiss it out of hand that few scholars still seem to appreciate the method's advantages. One advantage is however that it can guide a quest for the conjectures where praxis is possible. Without a theory of the totality of social relations, we can – as Tsing does -- discover "agency" everywhere, and everywhere to an equal extent, since there is no concept of the structure this agency is supposed to defy. Both Tsing and the Marxist tradition she claims to criticize place methodology above theory but the true difference is that Tsing's methodology is explicitly aimed at avoiding theory and hence produces description whereas Marxist

methodology seeks to produce explanations through a dialectic of induction and deduction. This being so, I do not dismiss Tsing's methodology altogether. I do however want to dismiss her dismissal of theory by pointing to the limits of her methodology and by arguing for the need for a theoretical understanding of indigenist responses to dynamics within the current world system as well an understanding of the world system through the lens of such social movements (the "critical struggles" perspective I discussed earlier).

Tsing notices the shift from class politics to indigenism and describes it as having happened because of the way "indigenous voice" travelled through a process of "friction" – both grip and tension – through different settings, eventually forming different "travelling models" of indigenism. This is similar to how Eva-Maria Hardtmann (2003), inspired by George Marcus' multi-sited fieldwork suggestions, describes her practice of doing fieldwork on dalit movements as "following the field". The field, in this interpretation, is understood as a relational network that can be traced not just along material objects but also according to plot lines, themes and symbols, and actors and their life histories. Such fieldwork that branches out in various directions and unpacks supra-local influences into various threads indeed opens up "the global" and is analytically useful. Inspired by Tsing's work – as well as that of Hardtmann – I too tried to describe indigenism in Kerala not as a homogeneous place-bound phenomenon but as a complex and varied set of political articulations that travel to places where the dominant themes of the "model" (Tsing) or "plot" (Marcus/Hardtmann) have some purchase, but then often become transformed. I was also interested in how these travels encounter what Tsing calls "gaps" (2004: 175) – "conceptual spaces and real places into which powerful demarcations do not travel well". I pay attention, in other words, to what Burawoy in his outline of "global ethnography" calls *dis*connections, which are equally important to think with as positive connections are.

My problem with Tsing's methodology, however, is that the descriptions that are acquired thus are mistaken for explanations. I do not think the fictitious travels of indigenous voice provide actual explanations for the rise of indigenism in Kerala and elsewhere or help us understand what is really going on in the world. I do not think the timing of the rise of indigenism in Kerala in the course of the 1990s was so much contingent on the local notions and global models of indigeneity interacting or that empirically tracing such "travels" provides the answer to the questions of how, why and to what effect and meaning the politics of indigenism has arisen there. For one of the main issues Tsing's method ignores is how the local is produced by the global – and I mean not just "adapts to", or "is in dialogue with", global campaigns and networks but rather how the local is formed by the global as much as the global is by the local. The research on Kerala that I work out in this dissertation strongly reminded me of the need to

understand this global-local process at a theoretical level and not just by tracing transnational influences since the latter were not in fact all that strong. C K Janu, the leader of the main indigenist movement in Kerala whom we will meet frequently in the pages of this dissertation, did travel abroad in the late 1990s and through the media indigenist notions originating in other contexts did enter Kerala. Yet this transnational influence seemed to be merely providing the language and symbols – the dressing so to say -- for a more structural shift in political mobilization that was at once more locally and more globally produced. In refusing to theorize, Tsing leaves this process generally denoted as "globalization" or "neoliberalism" unpacked – while she claims to want to undermine its universal pretentions, it remains an unchallenged but apparently uninteresting "background" or "discourse" to her description of the global rise of indigenism. And this in turn prevents the necessary complex and ever-changing answer to the question of how exactly the capitalist world economy conditions political mobilization in different places around the world at different, but connected, times: how the local, all the way down to people's political subjectivities, is shaped by the global. And, in turn, how we can readjust our understanding of the global in light of new political subjectivities. This dialogical move of abstraction and concretization is not only necessary to achieve a better theoretical understanding of the global but also to make fieldwork discoveries meaningful – in fact, to allow for discovery at all.

After tracing the notion of indigeneity historically and contemporary in chapters 2 and 3, it is hence a dialogical perspective that I use to make the next step in my dissertation, towards an *explanation* of the rise of indigenism. Through such a perspective, indigenism, locally perceived as the quest on behalf of an original society to confront its subjugation to the world system, at the same time signals a disintegrative relational process unfolding in those regions, and amongst those population groups, where the increased mobility that capital won for itself since the late 70s is destroying local regimes of labor in favor of "accumulation by dispossession". In parts II and III of this dissertation I argue for the relevance of such a theoretical view but also show that it needs refinement in terms of what is happening in those areas where it is not an alliance of finance capital and the state physically dispossessing people of their land or deliberately dispossessing them of the social rights acquired in previous struggles but more, as in the case of Kerala, about the mobility of global capital gradually putting such pressure on local economies that the kind of livelihoods and public provisions characterizing the "expanded production" phase of global capitalism in the post-WWII period became impossible or overshadowed by private capital.

By studying the political economy of Kerala and how it has changed in recent history I am not simply looking at "local conditions" that explain why travelling models of indigenism stick or

not but at globally-produced local processes, not authored by a hand-full of activists or capitalists but by a complex totality we need to try and understand in its systematic qualities. I can agree with Tsing and others that this does not mean the process is "unauthored" but this does not mean accepting the implication that exactly how it is authored can be traced empirically: precisely because there are so many authors involved, a description of its main plots and actors necessarily has to be complemented by a more theoretical understanding of the totality of social relations producing a shift in political subjectivity. The systematic qualities of this totality are not however unaffected by indigenist politics: having an idea of the structuring forces of the capitalist world economy also gives us the chance to see where and how indigenism actually intervenes in it. What I aim for thereby is not just the discovery of what Tsing calls "agency" – which seems to be any sustained action on the part of social actors – but to look for praxis, the kind of agency that confronts the structural logic of capitalism. And this, in turn can only be discovered through the dialectic of moving from the local (ethnography) to the global (theory) and back.

I share Tsing's worry about the determinedness of capitalism – its power to exert limits and put pressure on what is possible at a particular point in time – but my methodological answer is not to retreat into methodological empiricism to the neglect of theory. Rather my answer is a commitment to a dialectical method that constantly moves between using and adjusting theories, that helps understand the world, what's happening in it, and how human action may strategically intervene in it. Obviously this work is, as Tsing's is, not a practice of simply observing from the sidelines, standing outside history and theorizing developments in (recent) history without participating in this history and influencing the future. Yet this is something different from the stance taken by many indigenous studies scholars of directly allying to a particular movement and placing advocacy above critical analysis. This in fact brings me to the second part of this methodological discussion, in which I argue that that efforts within anthropology to bring anthropological knowledge closer to social movements or oppressed people have perhaps focused too much of their energy on sympathetic gestures towards our assistants and informants in the field (whom we often might as well simply call our friends), ignoring or worse, replacing the much more difficult struggle,that is primarily our responsibility, of retaining the academic freedom that is so essential to being a critical intellectual counterpart to activism.

1.2.2 *Reflexivity and Academic labor*

> "I have been transformed into a machine condemned to devour books and then throw them, in a changed form, on the dunghill of history" (Karl Marx in Priestland 2009: 38).

Many scholars reading Marx' complaint anno 2011 will immediately identify with this claim but may then subsequently wonder when it was last that they were even allowed to "devour books" and freely add their own creations to the historical pile of knowledge. Most will not live in the same conditions of relative poverty as Marx did but the creation of wealthy universities through neoliberal means has not necessarily added to the richness of social science. My dissertation evolved in this very context of neoliberal university reform and one can hardly imagine such a process *not* affecting the research pursued. In this light, the second methodological dimension that I want to discuss with some explicitness is the "relational nature of information", how the methodological choices discussed above on how to study the social world are "themselves part of the social system under study" (Hopkins 1979: 45). Indeed, though it is tempting to try and perform objectivity by writing as if an academic text is independent of its social embedding this would be doubly self-defeating. First of all because to pretend the social context is of no major influence on one's work contradicts social science's – and certainly anthropology's – own necessary core insight on the historical and social character of facts (Lukacs 1923). But also since not acknowledging the social conditions necessary for the production of academic knowledge makes it difficult to defend them against a host of mechanisms that are set to restrict the space for independent research.

When it comes to thinking about how to deal with the social embeddedness of knowledge production, many attempts fail to keep a balance between critically examining the context structuring one's research and critically examining the relationship between researcher and informant. What is known as "reflexivity" is usually about the latter, about making explicit and more democratic the relation between the researcher and the researched. The "reflexive turn" in anthropology this comes out of occurred around the mid-1980s and demanded a re-thinking firstly of anthropology's historical complicity with structures of inequality wrought by European colonial expansion. It also, however, incorporated a feminist critique that emphasized "positionality" as the explicit acknowledgement of the situatedness and partiality of knowledge claims and attention to the ethnographer's position in relation to her interlocutors. A third form of reflexivity that followed, known particularly from James Clifford and George Marcus' 1986 book *Writing Culture,* was the quest to undermine the seeming transparency of the relationship between fieldwork practice and writing, focus attention on the rhetorical strategies by which "objectivity" is produced, and experiment with writing strategies that would challenge the conventional distinction between subjective and objective styles of writing. Turing a "reflexive"

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eye to my own work, I will shortly sketch some of the biographical influences, personal positionality, and fieldwork relations involved – more of which is available in the appendix to this dissertation where I have detailed a particularly dramatic fieldwork episode (which led to my expulsion from India).

Having grown up largely in the global South where my father worked for a Dutch rural development agency, "development" was an obvious interest of mine. Yet through various critical encounters, I became more interested in the global political structures producing underdevelopment and the ways in which local people themselves had resisted these than in becoming a development practicioner. Hence I became interested in Kerala, where "development" had been achieved certainly not by mediation of foreign consultants but through political struggle. Arriving in Kerala and visiting the Communist headquarters in Trivandrum for the first time in 2003, I was welcomed with "red salutes" as a "comrade from the Netherlands" and soon enough became closely befriended to a journalist for the Communist daily, the *Deshabimani*, who more or less adopted me into his family and taught me a great deal on the Communist movement in Kerala. Becoming, in the process, less of an outsider, I also however started to feel the accompanying restrictions on freely discussing the challenge posed to the Communist movement by the Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha and of my independent movement as a woman – the latter notwithstanding my Communist friend's open-mindedness in the matter. Unlike my Communist friend, my family biography and livelihood was not linked to the party, nor did the neighborhood gossip on my improper gender behavior affect me as it did my friend's family. Hence after about two months, we decided I would move on to start independent fieldwork. In this, the two female research assistants I found – after much trial and error -- at the Department of English at Kozhikode University were invaluable. Though they would hate to describe themselves as "feminist" (understandable considering the matriarchal examples of this species in Kerala), they were certainly radical in their criticism of gender relations in Kerala. Through our many debates they sharpened my thoughts, particularly also on gender relations, and both women soon understood exactly the type of questions I was interested in.

My research assistants were also unique however simply in the fact of accompanying me despite the strong caste and particularly gender taboos enforced in Kerala on unmarried educated young women hanging out in poor people's colonies outside the vigilance of family

networks[4]. There was one colony, in Wayanad - the district where the AGMS emerged - where we returned to almost every week, often several days, during the year of fieldwork I did (and with return visits later on).   After we befriended the woman active in running the "kindergarten" (*anganwadi*) in the colony and people saw us returning to the colony daily, those people of the colony who initially had seemed a bit suspicious or weary of our presence, soon enough seemed to appreciate the interest we took in their stories. Though most adults of the colony had hardly attended school, we soon discovered this made their views more interesting and unpredictable than most of the educated Malayalees I talked to (certainly when it came to "adivasis", it was often all too predictable what educated Malayalees had to say on the topic). Most people moreover had enough confidence to interview me back about what my interest in their colony was all about and what could be in it for them – questions I usually answered by explaining I was writing a book on the movement they took part in, that there was nothing directly in it for them perhaps but that I was doing my best to make sure their struggles would not be forgotten. Of course this was all perhaps a bit too immaterial for many and so I took the slightly risky step of sponsoring the acquisition of a television and antenna for the woman we were closest to in the colony – the only set-up I could think of that would not posit me as the patron "giving gifts" but would contribute something significant and at least semi-public to the colony[5]. After many visits to the colony, I started to feel so comfortable there that it was always a shock when I would look at pictures where I was standing beside people in the colony: a white giant, almost twice the size of most people at the colony!

 In breaks from fieldwork with my research assistants amongst mostly AGMS activists and adivasi workers in Northern Kerala – in the colony I just described, but also in other colonies and at several land occupations[6] -- I travelled throughout Kerala (and sometimes over its borders) to meet activists of other political groupings, scholars working on adivasi issues, bureaucrats in charge of implementing adivasi development plans, cultural producers of "adivasi" art, journalists who had been reporting on the AGMS, politicians active for the

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[4] Such "shameful" behavior was bound to lead parents to hasten their search for a proper groom (before the young woman's reputation was beyond repair) and hence was in some ways all the more risky for women who valued their freedom.

[5] That was a somewhat risky step was apparent from the issues it gave rise to: some women were very happy that the television in the colony stopped many of the colony's people from watching television at the nearby shop and, in the process, getting further indebted to it. The shopkeeper, obviously, was less pleased. My friend who had the television in her possession, moreover, had decided that she would only put it on after school hours – something many people agreed with her on but others were angry about. And not to mention the fact that soon the clay ridges around my friend and her neighbors' houses were crumbling because so many people were always gathering there to watch television.

[6] My vagueness here is to protect my informants and myself since it is a so-called "politically sensitive" topic I study (something I have been made all too aware of).

"adivasi" cause, environmentalists and landlords with distinct views on "the tribal question", social workers in charge of adivasi welfare , and tourism promoters interested in using the potential in adivasi culture to attract more tourists to "God's own country" (as the Kerala Ministry of Tourism liked to call Kerala). I moreover spent several months with dalit-adivasi activists in Central Kerala, one of whom hosted me in his family and became a close friend. Of the opinion that the Keralese variant of Marxism was simply a cover-up for upper-caste dominance, my discussions with this friend helped me greatly in sharpening my arguments. Together, my research assistants, Communist and dalit friends all had a tremendous, critical impact on my research, through their views were often conflicting. Their influence is a reflection of the kind of informants (and research assistants) I sought to befriend and become close to. Despite the sympathy I have for each, I never however seriously considered following reflexive experiments such as explicitly combining activism and ethnography or co-authoring my text. The former was partly since posing as an activist would probably have had me expelled even sooner but also because I think anthropologists have a distinct, critical role to play where they are not part of the social movement(s) (or kinship and social networks) they study (see e.g. Edelman 2001). Not co-authoring, I could preserve some of the freedom that a relative outsider has.

Being able to invite the reader to glimpses of the human interaction that produces anthropological knowledge and narrating in a more personal voice are important achievements of the reflexive turn that have made anthropology a more open and accessible (if perhaps also more endangered) discipline. Yet, as I indicated, a problem I see is that most reflexivity today seems to sidestep the most fundamental issue.Concentrated on the (abstract) concrete of personal biographies, the fieldwork encounter, or the ethnographic text, what is often neglected is a reflexive look at the (concrete) abstract of the institutional context that turns this combination into the commodity called a "PhD" (or, later perhaps, a career) and that in the process threatens to make what is potentially one of the most creative (if also elitist) work experiences in the modern division of labor into yet another mechanical, market-driven exercise. With the attempt at overcoming anthropology's colonial past by producing less prejudiced, more openand modest anthropologists, deeply critical of racism and the potential power of the researcher over his research subjects including through her texts, existing exercises in "reflexivity" tend to skip over the other side of the question, one arguably much more determinant in producing both past and contemporary colonial tendencies in anthropology: while focusing on the question of how the anthropologist is potentially disciplining her subjects, it ignores how sheherself is being disciplined. Pondering the latter question puts into doubt the notion of the old-fashioned colonial anthropologist whom we are now beyond: many students today are taught how racist or oppressive such anthropologists

often were -- a few exceptions notwithstanding – and continue with a firm *conviction* not to engage in such forms of anthropological practice. What they do not learn is that these practices were not simply about the moral fiber and convictions of the anthropologist in question or a reflection of the general ignorance of anthropologists at the time but rather the outcome of powerful mechanisms that in complex ways tied anthropologists' careers to the compromises they made with the institutions endowing them with their professional status – mechanisms that have in many ways only gotten a greater grip over anthropologists' careers since the formal end of European imperialism.

Thinking about the institutional context of knowledge production is also important in terms of engaging with the contemporary power imbalances in the field of anthropological knowledge production. It forces us to be explicit about what exactly would ideally distinguish academic from non-academic knowledge production and in the process acknowledge that sometimes persons positioned outside of academia are in a better position to work under this ideal than persons positioned within academia today. Hundreds of dissertations could be (and have been) written on this question but since mine is not on this topic, I will be necessarily brief.[7] I will merely emphasize that academic knowledge production in my view ultimately goes back to a – contested – enlightenment ideal that there is something universal about the human mind (and body) and that being freed as much as possible from the necessity of adjusting one's words and actions to the relations of power in which one has to reproduce one's personhood, enables the production of knowledge that indeed goes beyond particular interests or dogmas. Within academia, one's position and career are hence ideally structured such that no particular political movement, state imperative, corporate interest, or kinship network has fundamental leverage over the contents or conclusions of research projects. The universalism inherent to the enlightenment ideal this pursues is in my view problematic in so far as academic institutions start actually claiming a universal status for the knowledge they produce rather than trying their best to create the conditions for such while at the same time acknowledging the always necessarily contextual nature of knowledge production.

The neoliberalization of the university, started in the Anglo-Saxon system, has through the "global marketing of knowledge production" had an influence on science everywhere. Since the 1980s, many countries have seen a shift away from the idea of academic institutions as a "public good" geared to producing an educated citizenry and toward a conception of higher education

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[7] For a concrete and critical analysis of the global political context in which the Central European University was founded see for instance Guilhot (2007). Compare this, however, with the commitment to a classical liberal (and far from neoliberal) vision of knowledge production promoted by Yehuda Elkana (2009), CEU's rector during most of my PhD.

as an individual investment in gaining particular "skills" that one can then sell on the labor market. The university, in this model, is transformed into a transnational business corporation, geared only towards attracting the maximum number of fee-paying students. Cris Shore (2010: 27f) for instance shows how in New Zealand, a country eager to be at the forefront of the "global knowledge economy", the process has had a perverse impact even on the content of research and teaching/learning since university managements demand that these activities are defined in terms of commercial interests and entrepreneurial outcomes. In the process, we see a replacement of "professional relationships based on collegiality and trust with a regime of measurement, performativity and surveillance", creating entirely contradictory incentives and ultimately "schizophrenic academic subjects" (ibid.). Ironically, the process is all the more intense at public universities because reform is not so much driven directly by the market but primarily initiated by the state: it is through increasing bureaucratic interference from the government, passed on by university managements, that academic research is increasingly coupled to market pressures. The institutionalization of "audit cultures" and their impenetrable discourse of ethical responsiveness to promote economic efficiency, for instance, has become a major interference with independent research in the Anglo-Saxon academic world (Strathern 2000). A critical awareness of (and struggle against) such processes that threaten to replace critical anthropology with corporate anthropology is hence a necessary complement to more fieldwork-centered reflexivity.

1.3 CONCLUSION

Certain times and places – and movements – make it easier for the researcher to stick to the kind of theoretical and methodological insights sketched above than others. Places where under the hegemony of what I have elsewhere called liberal-culturalism, indigeneity has become fixed as a coherent and hardly contested identity discourse – for instance in the US – this project would be perhaps almost impossible, all the more so in the absence of a historical awareness of real alternatives to a capitalist world order. Outside of the circuits of militant liberal culturalism, in regions that have known strong socialist movements that continue to cast their shadow into the future, this project is a much more likely one. In Latin America, for instance, one could in the last quarter of the twentieth century find a lot of explicit confusion when it comes to indigeneity and class. The Zapatista rebellion and its interpretation were at the heart of this, with some anthropologists, such as June Nash (2001), being particularly impressed by the "Mayan" cosmologies it apparently based itself on, whereas others, such as Neill Harvey (1998), saw it as a continuation of the struggle for land and democracy that socialist groups had historically been

waging in the region. Just over the border, in Guatemala, there was an explicit – and less sympathetic -- controversy on interpretations of the civil war. As Diane Nelson (2003) described, the war was no longer generally interpreted, as it was in the 1980s, as a "class war with ethnic components" but was now claimed, by so-called *culturales*, to have been a racist war perpetrated by right *and* left against the indigenous Maya. Or, to move further south, in Bolivia some emphasized how Evo Morales was the country's first indigenous president, while others reminded of how he himself had identified above all as a Trotskyite unionist (cp e.g. Gordon 2009, Postero 2006).

The Bolivian agricultural workers union CSUTCB confronted the tensions head-on by stating in 1983: "we refuse to accept and will never accept class reductionist ideas which transform us to the status of mere "peasants"... [n]or do we accept ethnic reductionism which transforms our struggle into a confrontation between "Indians" and "whites"" (Yashar 2005: 179). I have seen it as one of my tasks to support this kind of refusal, which is also about the intellectual project of refusing to understand words as signifiers of essential meanings rather than relationships. Sitting in the cross-fire between indigenist groups refusing to accept Marxist thinking can be anything but hypocritical, and socialists choosing to consider indigenist activists as opportunists or even racists is not too comfortable. It sometimes indeed felt as if I were, as Diane Nelson (2003: 141) expresses her experiences in this regard, "poking like a finger in the wound". Yet to create political space beyond the common-sense that helps to fix these positions and ideas into a deadlock, I feel this poking is precisely the anthropologist's task. This poking, moreover, came to me almost inevitably in Kerala when moving between indigenist and Communist activists. Kerala is a rather unique ground to study the tension precisely because the active confrontation of the Communist movement and the indigenism movement there tends to lay bare the complexities involved perhaps as clearly – or even clearer – than in many Latin American settings.

Before I turn, in the next chapters, more resolutely to my study of Kerala and the Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha, I must say a few words about Kerala's "exceptionalism" and the question of what lessons we may learn from the Kerala experience. Kerala is without doubt "part of India" and differences it has with the rest of India have developed precisely because of particular historical processes within the Indian peninsula in its interaction with the rest of the world. "Local histories" or "tradition" in Kerala include the many overseas influences that have shaped and become part of Kerala for at least two centuries as much as it does the matrilineal inheritance forms and extremely rigid caste system that seem to have characterized Kerala in the nineteenth century. Kerala is not so much an exception as a particular relational conjunction in a wider historical trajectory. Kerala is interesting, for my study at least, particularly in terms of

the degree to which a "Communist" program of land reform, wage protection and other social rights was implemented, how the ideology of Communism is part of many people's common-sense understanding of the world in Kerala, and how the Communist movement managed to gain power within an overall democratic framework. This has certainly contributed to Kerala being able to face the "challenges" of neoliberalism without immediately creating the stark levels of class polarization and poverty that have developed in other parts of India (see Sandbrook et al. 2007). Yet liberalization has nevertheless created a growing divide between the richest and poorest groups in Kerala. It has led to the progressive dismantling of the historical architecture of the Kerala model and created economic and social problems that are probably better termed "hazards" than "challenges" (Oommen 2010). As this dissertation will show, projects for local social democracy as instituted and often revitalized in Kerala cannot – or in any case do not – hold out against the onslaught of neoliberalism indefinitely. The need for a global confrontation with capital remains.

The most notable quality of Kerala to the study of the rise of indigenism is, however, that modern indigenism has only recently emerged in Kerala. Since it is not yet a very well-oiled or institutionalized program, the variety of interpretations of indigenism and indigenous identity are hence not hidden but in fact rather obvious. In addition to this, neoliberal restructuring of the kind David Harvey talks about is a more subtle process in Kerala. This adds to making an explanation of the rise of indigenism based on primordial identities or an abstract "threat to indigenous livelihood" unsatisfactory – it forced me to move along the lines of the research program I sketched in this chapter to get at more satisfactory explanations for the rise of indigenism. The degree to which Kerala's indigenist movements incorporate a variety of political strands and seem to constantly veer into counter-hegemonic directions – in the interest of working-class rather than landed adivasis, in the interest of broad alliances confronting social inequalities rather in the interest of exclusive communities– also forced me to consider the possibility that indigenism is no mere reaction to (derivative of) global forces but could also mean a re-incarnation, by other means, of past struggles for emancipation. Hence it were not just my theoretical and methodological insights that guided me towards certain explanations and openings but also what I encountered in Kerala itself. Since history is constantly in the process of creating what Eric Wolf called "hidden histories", particularly when it comes to failed or fragile attempts at socialist solidarity or complex relational understandings of indigenous identity, I think the traces of the complex interrelation of socialist and indigenist – or of emancipatory and autonomous – politics that are still so clearly visible in Kerala may also help scholars studying the rise of indigenism in other context become sensitive to histories already more hidden there.

PART 2
ADIVASINESS AND ITS DISCONTENTS

CHAPTER 2

THE "TRIBE" IN WORLD TIME

The trajectory of the making of the notion of the tribe is a dense accumulation of hidden assumptions shaping the beliefs of our time, carried on from ideas dominating our past. Who and what "adivasis" are has thereby become what Gramsci would call common-sense. The aim of this chapter is to disturb this common-sense, to demonstrate its historical construction and thereby deconstruct the hegemonic premises sustaining its coherence. I do this in order to open up space for a more critical and conflicted understanding of the tribe in the context of the political interventions and struggles occurring in its name. If we want to consider the possibility that indigenism, a politics centering on "adivasiness", may hold a transformative, counter-hegemonic vision in Kerala today, it is important to first understand the historical challenges it faces in this respect because of the problematic historical baggage the notion carries. By examining the notion of the tribe, this chapter also takes a critical look at the history of anthropology, a discipline that has played a major role in legitimizing the conceptual and political divisions the notion draws. This chapter is not about who or what "tribes" *really* are – it is not about correcting mistaken theories about the historical origins of particular tribes. Neither is it an ethnographic study of the contemporary ways in which the notion of the tribe is operationalized as a category of rule in everyday life in Kerala, though the next chapter of this dissertation does study in some detail how the notion is negotiated within the context of main adivasi political movement in Kerala today. What this current chapter provides is a study of secondary sources aiming to trace how the notion of the tribe emerged. It hence provides the historical background of the kind of conceptual references that a politics that bases itself on the notion has to negotiate with.

This chapter will start with a discussion of the tribe's trajectory in the capitalist world system – in "world time" as Walton (1984: 181) calls it. We will see the "tribe" originally started as a concept through which various philosophers argued over their understanding of the modern world: the "tribe" was assumed to be everything modern class society was not. If class was progressive and rational, the tribe was primitive and innocent; if modern society was polarizing and alienating, tribal society was egalitarian and organic. As the British empire took on a more proactive role in ruling the Indian subcontinent, the "tribe", however, became entangled in the colonial effort to govern the territory's population. Though the ethnographic exercises of trying

to finalize the category of the tribe and who belonged to it were full of contradictions, the label nevertheless came to play a major role in determining the limits within which political debate concerning these "tribals" could take place. Moving on to a discussion of the tribe in post-Independence India, we see how debates on "the tribal question" were still heavily shaped by the ethnographic state, which determined the boundaries within which the "tribe" could be signified: those who attempted to deconstruct these boundaries often failed to become recognized as having participated in the debate on the question at all.

The second part of this chapter moves to a more detailed consideration of how the practice of anthropology has historically contributed to understandings of the "tribe" in Kerala. As I demonstrate, the production of ethnographic knowledge of a particularly isolating and essentializing kind has remained largely uncontested in anthropological work on Kerala, despite the fact that radical social movements in Kerala have historically focused on science as a site for emancipation. Only with the rise of the AGMS did academia take notice of relevant realities outside of the dominant paradigm of tribal ethnography – and still mostly in disciplines other than anthropology. I hence end this chapter with a brief overview of literature (and films) in disciplines that have responded to the rise of the AGMS in ways that complement its agenda. In presenting some of the most significant knowledge produced in response to the debates that have arisen around the AGMS, I also acknowledge these as sources this dissertation draws on in trying to produce a relevant intervention from anthropology that does not succumb to the ruling ethnographic paradigm.

2.1   THE TRIBE IN AN EXPANDING WORLD SYSTEM

> "The continuing study of colonial regimes should be more than a neo-abolitionist denunciation of a form of power now safely consigned to history"
> (Stoler and Cooper 1997: 35).

I will here consider the history of the notion of the tribe in the context of the (un)making of class relations within the capitalist world system. This history has a continuing influence on the present by shaping the lenses through which "the tribe" is seen today. Divorced of this kind of "structuring" perspective (Abrams 1982) – one that sees the past as continuing into the future by forming the material on and through which future decisions are made –the study of the history of the tribe indeed, as Stoler and Cooper warn, may run the danger of becoming a "neo-abolitionist denunciation" of past ideas and practices (1997: 35). The second challenge, however, is that in historically deconstructing the concept of the tribe, I do not want to presume a linear evolution of the notion itself any more than I want to follow the Hegelian belief in the

necessary rationality of history that is such a considerable part of the "tribe's" problematic intellectual baggage. Instead I have tried to consider the historical-intellectual trajectory of the notion of the tribe, as that of other concepts, as "that of its various fields of constitution and validity, that of its successive rules of use, that of the many theoretical contexts in which it developed and matured" (Foucault 2007: 5). In order to pursue a genealogy of the notion of the tribe, with a study of the historical processes producing it, I have adopted a critical agnostic stance vis-à-vis the Hegelian certainty of progress and instead, from a "structuring" interpretation of history, have seen the past as setting limits and exerting directional pressure on the present but also offering many moments of contingency.

It would of course have been satisfactory to *not* start out with European debates when discussing historical development in India – to "provincialize" Europe (Chakrabarty 2000) and start with a discussion of the actual history of some of the peoples figuring in this dissertation. All the more so since "tribes" are almost per definition denied history. Yet the problem is that the historical studies that exist on this subject are all heavily formed by European concepts. All that is possible for an anthropologist like me, who needs to rely on secondary historical sources and on what people tell me about the past *in the present*, is hence to deconstruct these dominant concepts. What this does is not so much give the "true" history of tribes in India but reveal the relations of power that have shaped the way we think about this history. As I discussed in the previous chapter, if you take a dialectical rather than a dialogical approach to the study of "tribes", the state and capital cannot be conceived of as external forces to the process of how these entities emerged. Perhaps before the intensification of capitalist incorporation of the north-eastern regions of India in the eighteenth century, one might ignore the determining effects of the capitalist world system and argue for a dialogical perspective. Yet to take a dialogical rather than a dialectical view of tribes in the modern history of Kerala – a period intensely shaped by global capital – would certainly unduly reify the boundaries between "tribes" and "non-tribes" as substantive and self-generated.

2.1.1 *IMPERIALIST INVENTIONS OF THE TRIBE: "I KNOW ONE WHEN I SEE ONE!"*

In this section I discuss how the notion of the "tribe" is the historical product of a transnational project of capitalist expansion that was hegemonic in its ability to largely set the terms in which struggle against it took place. The process includes two major moments I focus on here: on the one hand the drastic class polarization happening within the "core" of the empire and on the other hand the intensified exploitation of its periphery. These two moments were closely interconnected, in the first place economically but also in terms of how theories emerging in one

context travelled to the other to fulfill a connected but reconstituted role there. The notion of the tribe was closely connected in Europe to the idea, which in the mid-nineteenth century became hegemonic, that society was "progressing" towards a rational endpoint. In order to conceptualize what this rational end point was, we saw the birth of what Adam Kuper (1988) has called "the illusion of primitive society" – captured by the notion of the "tribe -- as its conceptual opposite. In this very meaning, the "tribe" gained an important function in the colonies as a way to divide and manage local populations.

Adam Kuper is right to stress the flexibility and adaptability of the notion of "primitive society", and with it the "tribe", as key to its survival over time. The notion of progress away from tribality was both part of the language of the bourgeoisie, who used it to legitimize their restructuring of society, and part of socialist utopian thinking that saw tribal society as an ideal to "return" to. The category of the "tribe" could be used to mobilize certain populations for capitalist production, just as it could be used in other contexts to argue for the need to protect "tribals" from such exploitation. The hegemonic function of the tribe lay primarily in how it prevented tribal struggles to be framed as another form of class struggle and vice versa. The notion of the "tribe" contributed to making it almost unthinkable that people considered to have entered the era of modern class society could form an alliance with those seen as its historical remnants to jointly contest the process of capitalist expansion that was affecting their lives.

To the contemporary anthropologist doing research on people that happened to be known as "tribes" in India, it can be rather puzzling why these groups are so often equated with "indigenous people" and "forest dwellers" when there seems to be no actual relation between being "indigenous" and living in a "tribal" community and where such people can be seen more often than not living outside of the forest just like "mainstream" others. What links the organization of a community on the basis of direct reciprocity and equality that is supposed to distinguish "tribal" communities and the fact of being the "first people" settled in a certain area and living in forests(or "jungles") together is not empirical reality. The overlap of categories did not originate so much in the empirical realities of the Indian subcontinent but in preoccupations with the changes that *European* societies were undergoing. Similar to how what still today are considered the "classics" on Indian society – notably Dumont's *Homo Hierarchicus* (1972) -- were written primarily as a commentary on what was going on in *Western* society, the notion of the "tribe" initially took shape as an obsession with that of which it was supposed to be its mirror-image: modern class society in Europe.

Since forests and "tribal" social organization (conceived as anything from mechanical solidarity to matriarchy) were not what Western modernity was, both could become linked with another

opposite of a society fully immersed in "historical progress": antiquity. As Wilmsen (1989: 10) remarks, tribes were paradoxically, "permitted antiquity while denied history". Whilethere are plenty of archeological evidencesindicating that many of the people now considered "tribal" used to form an integral part of regional political economies, theories that eventually carried over into colonial discoursehad to depict "tribals" as isolated and forests as primordial, unaffected by everything modern society was affected by -- "predation and production, tribute and trade, advance and retreats of the forest and the sown" (Guha 1999: 200).

I will refer to such theories here mostly as "social evolutionism" since this was a dominant and virulent current in the upsurge of philosophizing on "the tribe" in Europe of the 1860s and 1870s (Kuper 1988) and has generally remained the term under which these theories have been remembered and contested. Many other stands of philosophy and later anthropology have however been based on a similar preoccupation with "primitive society". Like the latter, the logic of social evolutionismrelies heavily on a Hegelian interpretation of history as the unfolding of "reason" – a faculty of every human mind and hence universal -- through the dialectic of contradiction and synthesis not just in the human mind but equally in historical reality. Social evolutionism, however, adds to a Hegelian interpretation of history a fixing of time periods in space by mapping them onto certain distinct "peoples" and/or territories. Social evolutionism proposed not only that human history consisted of certain "stages" of evolution but also that the distinct communities "found" (in fact increasingly constructed) in the world were reflections of these different stages.

European industrializing nationswere immediately recognized as the most "advanced" and the signpost of the level to which "reason" had progressed in human history. Just as "tribal" peoples exhibiting a lack of historical progress were identified in the colonies, similar "backward", "primitive" and "degenerate" people were, however, identified in Europe itself amongst autochthonous working classes (Guha 1999: 14). The urge amongst many nineteenth century academics to mobilize the notion of tribality to help define and defend modern capitalist society should be read against the background of the "threat" from a growing tide of socialist mobilization since the French revolution. According to Guha (1999: 14), this tide forced the bourgeoisie in Europe to look for a better and more potent ally than the religious orthodoxies espoused by the church to combat the rising popularity of the notion that all men (and perhaps even women) were equal. An additional *racial* element to the tribal-primitive-forest-dwelling brew made for an all the more potent combination of defining all that was progressive about capitalist society and making it clear, once and for all, that tribal society was a "dark" reality to be avoided. Indeed, ethnographic publicationsin 1848, seemed obsessed with "in the name of science" proving that the "the natural equality of men" was false (ibid.).

The socialist challenge is, however, ambiguous. If we look at Marx' own writings, we can see that the Communist Manifesto (1848), for instance, avoids the essentialism of mapping historicaleras onto particular apparently isolated communities but nevertheless demonstrates the clear conviction that there are particular "stages of development" that societies pass through and that historical progress along these stages is "inevitable". It moreover explicitly describes the Western proletariat as the most "advanced" of all oppressed peoples so far and the bourgeoisie as having played a progressive role in society. It seems, as Wilmsen (1989: 20) argues, that Marx in any case "shared the basic tenets of his contemporaries with respect to a prehistoric era set in polar opposition to our own". On the other hand, Wilmsen adds that unlike most other nineteenth century thinkers, Marx considered contemporary foragers "products of historical contingencies, not of a natural essence or an evolutionary stasis" (ibid: 21). From a reading of the *Ethnological Notebooks* Marx compiled near the end of his life, Gailey (2006) argues that Marx confronted social evolutionists of his time with a historically specific and analytical reading of different forms of pre-capitalist class society, against their evolutionary racial typologies. In contemporary manifestations of such pre-capitalist societies, Marx did not see "vestiges" of the past but evidence of resistance to the penetration of state-associated institutions (ibid: 16). Marx moreover, according to Gailey, admired the absence of private property and the classless division of labor characteristic of primitive societies that he envisioned a Communist society would achieve through "dialectical return" toward a more technologically developed form of "primitive Communism"(ibid.). Yet in all this, the notion of the "tribe" also in Marx' writings then fulfilled its usual role of signaling, even if in a more positive light, the opposite of class society. In that sense it also set the trend for the gross neglect by intellectuals in the "core" of generically socialist or even explicitly Marxist initiatives later in the twentieth century amongst people caught under the definition of the "tribe".

During the second quarter of the nineteenth century, under pressure from competition with other emerging imperial powers, the British ruling class saw it necessary to move from the extraction of wealth primarily through trade to a more minute organizing of relations of production in the Indian subcontinent, both largely through, and with the purpose of, taxation. As colonial rule in India hence shifted from "a regime of sovereign power to a regime of governmental power" (Gidwani 2008: 7), the notion of the tribe gained a concrete function in India. Simply put, "there were no 'tribes' in India until the European perception of Indian reality constructed them and colonial authorities gave them their administrative sanction" (Devalle 1992: 51). Ideas of what primitive tribal society was as developed "at home" – together with home-grown racist theories –received new credibility and confirmation in the colonies, from where they again reverberated back to the core (Cooper and Stoler 1997: 12). Being at the

center of exercises to either legitimize capitalism or envision its transcendence in Europe, the "tribe" as attached to actual population groups in India and was central to efforts to isolate these groups from other subaltern populations, either for their protection or that of the colonists.

Through the lenses of social evolutionary theory, colonial officials came to see certain social groups in India as "childlike peoples", unable to quite grow up (Skaria 1999). These "tribes" logically had to be indigenous and live in the forest since colonial officials understood that "tribal" organization characterized the earliest humans (the "savages"). They also assumed their way of life was more "primitive" than other economic systems, which had led these groups of people to be driven into the forest when they "came into contact" with more advanced agricultural communities who started claiming plain lands for themselves and obviously had the power to do so since they were more "advanced" (ibid.). This same theoretical framework was also used by British officers to legitimize their rule over predominantly "barbarian", feudal communities in South Asia, on the one hand through the claim that British rule would entice them to reach a higher stage of development but also because the "noble savages" found in the forest needed protection by enlightened British rule from their "barbarian" neighbors in the plains (ibid.). Social evolutionism, while fixing and isolating population groups into particular niches simultaneously mystified this *effect* of colonial rule as evidence of the essentially primordial and isolated nature of tribes.

Views on "tribes" in India were also supported by another grand narrative of historical development: the "Aryan race theory" that gained popularity in nineteenth century Europe. Formulated initially by German comparative philologists in the 1840s and 50s as part of the "discovery" of the Indo-Aryan family of languages, the Orientalist Max Muller took up the concomitant "Aryan invasion theory" to claim Indian civilization was based on the invasion of "Aryan" peoples from the north some time around the second millennium B.C. According to historian Romila Tapar (2006), reference to an "Aryan" people in old religious texts that Muller based his theory on, were always about social status and language rather than race. Nevertheless the theory was taken up by British officials who read "Aryan" descent as a marker of racial distinctiveness of the more "developed" caste groups who supposedly shared a common descent with the British, as opposed to the darker-skinned Dravidian race from which most lower castes and tribes descended.

When the 1857 uprising, claimed by Indian nationalists today as the country's first "war of independence", spread to the population groups in Central India whom British officials considered "tribal" (Hardiman 2004), they felt confirmed in their ideas about these groups as

"wild people", unable to grasp the British civilizing mission[8].With it, the need to distinguish "tribes" from those communities embodying a "higher"– more hierarchical, easily controllable, and taxable -- feudal "stage of development" also became felt. The former were to be left alone since they had proven themselves "wild" and "primitive" and beyond possible reform into a useful labor force. Feudal society, meanwhile, was to be the prime target of the white man's burden to "civilize" colonial subjects and make them give up their cruel, barbaric practices such as sati and child marriage. The great "peasant/tribe divide" (Li 2000), a preoccupation of colonial rule in many colonies, translated in India into the "caste/tribe" distinction, with the census – first held in 1871 - as its most symbolic battleground. In interpreting the 1857 rebellion as an "anthropological failure" rather than as a political or economic event, the following years saw the colonial state take on an increasing "ethnographic character" (Dirks 2001: 148).

"Tribals" and non-tribals came to be treated as two entirely different categories of subjects, largely resulting, as the famous missionary-turned-ethnographer Elwin Verrier claimed, "from a desire to quarantine the tribes from possible political infection" (1959:45). The distinction linked on the one hand to the romantic ideals developing in England at the time around the emerging dichotomies of nature and culture. Most colonial officers projected these ideals onto "tribes" as yet uninfected by the cruelties of human character that market society brought about.[9]But at the same time the distinction was driven by a realist concern to "divide and rule". Hence emerged "rigid ... conceptions of the tribal as being clearly differentiated from the rest of society", even where so-called tribals and non-tribals lived in the same area (McMillan 2005: 116) and where in practice, so-called "tribes" were often directly targeted for "recruitment" into the labor force serving the needs of British plantation-owners (Phillips 2003). British policy also stressed that tribals required a different sort of administration even though practically it was unclear how this was to be organized where they did not live in socially homogeneous areas.

The "tribe" came to define a disparate group of what were commonly known as *jatis* (occupational/endogamous castes; Hardiman 2004: 136) as part of British officers' exercise to "render fluid and confusing social and political relationships into categories sufficiently static and reified and thereby useful to colonial understanding and control" (Cooper and Stoler 1997: 11). Colonial officers often either turned into ethnographers themselves or sought the help of

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[8] The 1857 Great Revolt or Sepoy Mutiny also confirmed officials' ideas about its source in the caste system since "ideologies of pollution and exclusion" had formed the spark of the mutiny when a new cartridge greased with pig and cow fat was introduced to the soldiers (Dirks 2003: 130).

[9] Archana Prasad (2003) describes these ideas as "ecological romanticism" and indeed traces their origin to the English opposition to the industrial revolution.

European ethnographers – and Indian collaborators -- to engage in such categorizing exercises. Though it is debatable to what extent the discipline of anthropology and anthropologists in the field initially facilitated – or on the contrary also at times were a major irritant to – colonial rule, there was a clear indirect effect of anthropology on administration in that many colonial officers received at least some training in anthropology and started using its cloak to "scientifically" validate their social mapping exercises (Kuper 1996: 99). It was particularly in the making of the first population survey, however, that anthropology gained a major role in colonial rule.

The colonial survey exercise started by drawing on the conviction that religion was the primary fault line in the subcontinent and its history. Since it was believed that Hinduism was "the antithesis of Islam", the primary distinction to be made in the first, 1871, all-India census was that between Hindu and Muslim, even though the myriad of religious practices and ideologies existing in the Indian peninsula at the time – some of which have since come to reside under the label of "Hinduism" – was perplexing enough that an author of the census had to admit he could not give any definition of the term since it encompassed everything from "the agnostic youth who is the product of Western education" to what he tellingly described as "the semi barbarous hillman, who … is as ignorant of the Hindoo theology as the stone which he worships in time of danger" (quoted from 1871 census in Bindu 2003). Hence the early censuses still talked rather loosely of tribes and castes, the only clear distinction in this regard being the "Criminal Tribes" category reserved for migrant and irregular population groups judged an urgent threat to the general peace and order.[10] As Susan Bayly observes of late nineteenth century European ethnologists, they were still very uncertain about "whether India was a homogeneous caste society, or a composite of casteless 'tribes', 'pre-Aryan' untouchables and 'caste-fettered' Hindu 'Aryans' (1999: 181).

By the 1881 census, the idea that "caste" was what defined Hinduism and that the tribe was outside of the Hindu fold had however taken root and yet another connotation was added to the tribal/aboriginal/jungle complex: that of being "nature worshippers" of "animalistic" religiosity. "Aboriginal religion" temporarily became a separate category in the census. This too, however, was far from clear-cut since despite the separate religious category for tribes in the 1881 census, there is also mention of "Christian tribes" as well as constant complaints about the impossibility of distinguishing "lower" forms of Hinduism from tribal religions. In subsequent censuses, the tribe was no longer a religious category and instead became a category onto its own ("aboriginal and jungle tribes") even though no economic way of life, religion, or other characteristic in fact united

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[10] The 1871 Criminal Tribes Act criminalized many itinerant *jatis* and – with help of the Salvation Army – forcefully settled them to make them available as labor in factories (see Radhakrishna 2001).

the category. As Crispin Bates (1995) succinctly argues, the "tribe" came to function largely as a "dustbin category" into which all that was difficult to fit elsewhere was thrown.

"Tribal" groups were mostly deemed neither Hindu nor Muslim or Christian but no legal consensus ever took shape that would exclude "tribal" groups from any particular religious affiliation[11]. Considering the vagueness of the notion of who would constitute a "tribal", debates on the categorizations of the census commissioners, despite all their "scientific" paraphernalia, often boiled down to the idea "I know one when I see one" (MacMillan 2005: 117). Under pressure from influential communities seeking to also be legally seen as "tribal" (or to leave the list and be considered something else), the list of tribes in the census of India has undergone all kinds of changes in the century following its introduction but the vagueness of criteria for inclusion remains as does, paradoxically, the general belief in the census as denoting absolute and unchanging historical truths about a community's place in society.

The complexity of what determines whether someone is "tribal" was augmented by the fact that colonial efforts to distinguish particular communities inevitably had different spatial expressions and thus interacted with mapping efforts to distinguish and control particular territories. A primary fault line in this regard was to mark off "forest" lands from agricultural/"revenue" areas, placing the former under the control of a "Forest Department" officially set up in 1864. These forestlands were deemed "zones of anomaly" in need of a distinctive regime of administration for constituting an "impenetrable hilly jungle" (Sivaramakrishnan 1999). Major "tribal" rebellions usually encouraged colonial administrators to pay additional attention to containing the effects of colonial expansion as the latter would usually bring an influx of exploitative state officials, moneylenders and landlords and consequent class polarization and revolt into "tribal" areas. This also led the colonial administration to try and codify the "customary" land rights prevailing in "tribal" areas and prohibit the transfer of land to non-tribals.

"Humanitarian" concerns regarding certain "tribes" contradicted other major concerns of imperial political-economy, notably the extraction of forest produce (particularly tropical hard wood) for the global economy (see Ramachandran Guha 2000; Sumit Guha 1999). Yet over time,

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[11] Scheduled Castes, on the other hand, cannot legally be Muslim or Christian (i.e., Muslims or Christians cannot claim SC status) since the experience of "untouchability" – a key defining characteristic of Scheduled Castes – is argued to exist only in Hindu religion (despite the many evidences that caste discrimination continues after conversion). More so than this argument, however, excluding Muslims and Christians from SC status has been a strategy of the Hindu right to discourage Dalits from converting to Christianity or Islam.

as the military power of the state increased and pacification was more feasible, the idea of forests as pristine, wild areas in need of protection trumped the need to protect the invisiblized people living from and sometimes in them, and became a convenient trope to evict people from areas rich in natural resources. Equally applicable to those "tribes" not living in or from the forest in the first place, the rhetoric of progress that placed the dark-skinned "savage" at the bottom of the civilization hierarchy and the industrious white man at its top helped organize the coercive labor practices necessary for the colonial economy and legitimized as ways to "uplift" these"depressed" people (Phillips 2003: 129).

The constant emphasis that the people categorized as "tribal", no matter how proletarianized and made part of the capitalist system, were clearly a different category of people, initially worked to keep capitalist processes of class formation at bay, but soon turned into a mechanism that prevented public recognition of such processes actually going on. As historian Sumit Sarkar (1983) has argued, the most militant outbreaks against British rule tended to be of tribal communities – and he emphasizes that the notion of the tribe "should not convey a sense of complete isolation from the mainstream of Indian life" as "the tribals were and are very much a part of Indian society as the lowest stratum of the peasantry subsisting through shifting cultivation, agricultural labourers, and, increasingly, coolies recruited for work in distant plantations, mines, and factories" (1983: 44). Yet the essential difference between "tribes" and people marked by class or caste, constantly rehearsed in surveys and colonial policies, contributed to the fact that the national liberation movement that was growing in the subcontinent hardly built alliances into areas considered "tribal" or acknowledged "tribal" workers and peasants as part of the struggle for independence. As we will see, also after Independence, the trope about the essential difference between tribal and non-tribal people survived even capitalism continued to upset the "traditional" distinctions between social groups.

2.1.2 *"AT THE STROKE OF MIDNIGHT", THE ETHNOGRAPHIC STATE LIVES ON?*

"At the stroke of midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom". I remember a Communist friend of mine from Kerala playing a tape with this historic Independence speech by Jawaharlal Nehru for me and having to fight his tears as these famous words filled the room. It is a sentence that probably every Indian knows and by which a generation of artists and writers have been inspired. But as Reka Roy (2007) remarks, it also perfectly captures the orchestrated character of the transition "at the stroke of midnight". It is thereby symbolic of what allowed "the most pernicious inheritance of colonialism" to be "the colonial role – persisting long after direct colonial rule – in fashioning the oppositional terms for the construction of the idea of a national community" (Dirks 2001: 274). In its very Constitution, the newly independent nation-state was to make a paradoxical exercise of basing the fundamental rights of citizenship on the individual, yet requiring the identification of particular "castes" and "tribes" to be Scheduled for a host of protective, affirmative and developmental initiatives.[12] Though intending to break with colonialism and its ethnographic interventions, the new "secular" Indian state often returned to treating the "tribe" as a category of essential difference and backwardness – a more benign version of the category of "caste" that stood for the evils of ancient and colonial India that the modern, independent nation was to overcome[13]. There was, however, as Anupama Rao (2009:2) observes, an important shift in governmentality from one "characterized by the culturalization of politics and enumerative technologies such as the census" towards a new phase "organized around the political technology of the franchise and procedures of representative government". Indeed, many of the popular democratic challenges launched after independence tried to politicize "caste" and "tribal" exclusions as questions of social inequality rather than "cultural" particularity. After 1931, caste no longer was a category included in the census except precisely for "Scheduled Castes" and "Scheduled Tribes".

Challenges to the ethnographic state and its role in shaping society in the Indian peninsula moreover had started long before Independence. As Vivek Chibber (2003) has demonstrated, the continuity of India's pre- and post-Independence economy and society had been conditional

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[12] According to the much-debated Article 46, declaring "The State shall promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people and, in particular, of the Scheduled Casts and the Scheduled Tribes, and shall protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation".

[13] Ritu Birla argues that in reality even Indian "vernacular" capitalism was – despite efforts by the British regime to implement a barrage of laws intended to allow the "free" circulation of capital – very much based on "caste-based councils, and more broadly, conventions that allowed for an extensive negotiability between the symbolic values of kinship, lineage, and community, and the material values of credit, trade, and investment" (2009: 233).

on the dismantling of the more radical movements that had figured in earlier phases of the struggle for independence and had threatened to challenge the relations of production and trade that locked India in its fixed position in the capitalist world system and reinforced existing local divisions. Crispin Bates, in retelling the history of India with specific attention to subaltern struggles, provides a detailed account of how "Bolshevik" and other trade unionist or socialist urban movements – as well as radical anti-feudal uprisings in the countryside – were systematically opposed by Gandhi who preferred to stand "assiduously aloof from these widespread symptoms of activism amongst the poor and industrial workers" and who choose Nehru to lead the Congress party precisely because he saw in him a leader who would not upset existing relations within Indian society but could rhetorically help the people "release some steam" (2007: 142). Whereas the momentum for Independence had been built up by a coming together of militant workers, peasants, students, Hindus and Muslims, after 1942 Congress was busy condemning any further militancy along these lines and instead promoting Gandhi's faith in "non-violence" (Sarkar 1983: 421f.). The labor movements that did exist did not seek connection to workers or peasants in areas known as "tribal" and many of the metaphors and imagery to promote labor rights – such as the critique of the "savage" aspects of capitalism or the denouncement of "jungle raj" – clearly reflect the lack of thought to going beyond the discursive caste-tribe divide and its stereotypes. Hence rather than initiating a process of confronting and transforming existing relations of power as they had been fixed ideologically and legally under colonial rule, the run-up to independence saw the taming of such energies as the indigenous ruling class prepared itself for the task of translating the pressures of global capital onto Indian society[14].

The relative continuity of governance structure after Independence is also reflected in the lack of scrutinizing in mainstream Indian academia of the ideological constitution of the kind of "scientific knowledge" generated under colonial conditions of production (Kavita 2003: 161). Where existing ethnographic fault lines were challenged it was usually in favor of the creation of the new cultural category of the Indian nation. Some nationalists argues that colonial categories had been fixed by the British colonizers in order to lock India in its "backward" condition and make sure the nation would remain forever divided. They hence, however, simplified the divisive pressures arising in the process of organizing the necessary consent and coercion for India to further integrate into the global circuits of capital as a matter of conscious conspiracy.

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[14] This is of course known from the trajectory of many other national independence movements as well. Frederik Cooper (2009), for instance, has powerfully recorded how the demand for equal citizenship rights that animated the early liberation movements in French Africa, lost out as "national independence" became the dominant agenda promoted by indigenous elites.

Indigenist mobilization: 'Identity' versus 'class' after the Kerala model of development?

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After Independence, instead of the challenge that militant popular movements had launched of addressing the structure of Indian economy and society, Nehruvian social democratic modernization was about paying lip service to radical change while making sure "the strong capitalist element behind Congress" needed not be "nervous about the security of its property" (as British officials reassured themselves; quoted in Sarkar 1983: 420). "Development" as understood by Nehru was a continuation of evolutionary models in updated form[15] and envisioned as a process "alleviating" poverty. It was not about confronting the social relations that continued to deepen economic inequality in India and that created "modern" forms of poverty worse than anything seen before India's incorporation into the world system (Davis 2001). If it could be called socialist, the Nehruvian variety was of a strongly modernist character with little affiliation, except in rhetoric, to romantic or radical socialism[16]. It centered on a rationally planned economy and secular values that were to replace the backwardness of traditional workplaces and religious prejudices. Large-scale development projects and above all mega-dams becameIndia's"temples of the future" (Khilnani 1997), drowning out the more radical efforts to democratize and politicize – rather than have rendered technical and legal – differences within Indian society.

In *Castes of mind*, Nicolas Dirks (2001) demonstrates the continuing hold of what he calls the "ethnographic state" over the way politics is practiced and imagined in India today, particularly with regard to caste. Surprisingly, he hardly mentions the notion of the tribe, though this "discovery" of the British continued to determine the imagination of how the people falling under its label were to be ruled as much as the discovery of "caste" did. Unlike caste, which in the modernist visions of Nehru and Ambedkar (though not in Gandhi's), was seen to be a sign of backwardness and feudal cruelty, the "tribe" was moreover generally imbued with positive associations. Though a sign of a primordial stage of history, a "zero level" (Singh 1989: 8) in terms of progress, the tribe was not an evil to be rooted out. Instead, Indian leaders were swayed to see "tribes" much as European thinkers had defined them. If capitalist society was admittedly creating conflict, inequality, and pollution, tribal societies were the opposite of all this: innocent, egalitarian, and in harmony with nature.

Jawaharlal Nehru had, as a chronicler put it, a "very soft corner for the tribals" and "did not want any change to be forced on the tribals" even though he also held to the opinion that "change is necessary, change is inevitable" (Das Gupta in K S Singh 1989: 110f). As K S Singh claims,

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[15] One such updated form was for instance Rostow's "stages of growth" theory, propagated around the world in the 1960s.

[16] I take this basic distinction between modernist, romantic and radical currents of socialism from Priestland (2009).

Nehru's socialism tried to steer a course between the "anthropological" approach that "sought to treat the tribals as museum specimens to be kept apart, for study and observation" and the "assimilation" approach which aimed to force development and "civilization" onto the tribes. Inspired in part by the Soviet Union's approach to what were there called "national minorities" (ibid: 9), Nehru wanted to encourage the preservation of the tribal "civilization of song and dance" (Nehru 1952 in Singh 1989: 3). He wanted to protect tribal "identity" belonging to an "original Communist" stage and wanted tribes to develop "in their own way" (ibid.). There was little room in the debate on the "tribal question" for envisioning the notion of the "tribe" as one amongst various interrelated expressions of historical social inequality. Solving the "tribal question" as defined by ethnographic conventions did not demand a restructuring of the Indian economy of the kind that had been called for by the popular movements that had fought for independence. Instead, it could suffice with designing policies towards select specific population groups, towards "the tribes or tribal communities or parts of or groups within tribes or tribal communities" which according to the procedures laid out in article 342 of independent India's Constitution had been "deemed to be Scheduled Tribes" (Constitution of India, 1950). Since knowing who was part of a "tribe" or "tribal community" was assumed to be unproblematic and since the exercise of "Scheduling" for the purpose of being targeted with the state's protective, affirmative, or developmental efforts was left to anthropologists, the heat of the debate was about which effort ought to take priority.

One of the most vocal proponents of the "integration" approach was G S Ghurye, a Sanskrit scholar and professor of sociology at the University of Bombay who held a PhD in anthropology from the University of Cambridge (Sinha 2004: 74).[17] Though the title and intentions of his book *The aborigines – so called – and their future* (1943) suggest otherwise, Ghurye saw "tribes" in much the same way the British had: as a lower, primitive form of life in need of civilization. Yet such was to be provided not by the white man but rather by wider Hindu society, of which tribes, Ghurye believed, had always already been a "backward", "imperfectly integrated" part. As a puritan Brahmin, Ghurye believed integration would expose tribes to better methods of cultivation, temper their "sexual license", and cure them of their drunkenness. Ghurye and his student M N Srinivas (e.g., 1962) put forward many arguments that seemed to put the ethnographic state in its place – against the view that "so-called" tribes had been isolated, for an understanding of tribal poverty as inseparable from the history of colonial exploitation, for a dynamic rather than a static view of tribal cultures. Yet such arguments kept intact an idea of the "tribe" as denoting not a particular discursive and historically constituted relationship but

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[17] According to Sinha (2004: 74), Ghurye never however did any fieldwork for his PhD.

an essential holistic entity on a continuum of backwardness and civilization. Ghurye's arguments were systematically geared toward arguing for a united modern India that, when truly accomplished, would automatically leave behind the problems of poverty, exploitation, and dispossession – not to mention the moral degradation -- that the British had introduced to India.

Ghandi's approach to "the tribal question" was close to Ghurye's, though he generally concentrated his political energies elsewhere, to the issue of eradicating untouchability – the blot on an otherwise harmonious, organic division of labor of which "Harijans" ("sons of God", as he preferred to call those most oppressed by the caste system[18]) were as much part as those whose calling happened to be studying the *vedas*. Launching anti-colonial as well as anti-untouchability campaigns from his native Gujarat, Gandhi seems to initially have had no idea that it was not just in North-Eastern hill states but also in his own Gujarat that the British had classified many groups as "jungle tribes" (Hardiman 2004: 136). It was only during the launching of the non-cooperation movement that he learned of their presence and started sending out volunteers to mobilize them, though by that time a protest movement consisting of thousands of Bhils (one of the so-called "tribes" in Gujarat) had already – to Gandhi's annoyance - taken the initiative of fighting for what they called "Gandhi raj". When the British eventually moved against the protesters, opening fire on a peaceful crowd and leaving at least 1,000 people dead, Gandhi's engagement with his self-proclaimed "tribal" followers remained luke-warm. It stayed that way even when during the civil disobedience movement of 1930-31, many "tribals" joined the struggle by disobeying forest laws. With Gandhi, the nationalist movement largely failed to appreciate "tribals'" own initiatives in the struggle for independence - an attitude that carried over in many aspects of post-Independence tribal development policy.

Nehru was influenced by the nationalist approach to the tribal question yet was also closely attentive to the argument for the "protection" of tribals, most explicitly perhaps advocated by Verrier Elwin, a self-taught anthropologist who from 1928 until his death in 1964 lived in ("tribal") Gond and Baiga communities and wrote a great number of monographs on these communities. Elwin was also Nehru's chief Advisor on Tribal Affairs for the North-Eastern Frontier Agency for a decade (Sinha 2004: 75). Originally he had come to India as a Christian missionary but, during the struggle for Independence, he had become a devote follower of Gandhi. On Gandhi's advice he went to work in tribal areas, only to eventually turn resolutely

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[18] The term was used by Gandhi to emphasize the fact that (former) untouchables were part of Hindu society. The term is strongly rejected by the dalit movement today for its paternalism, its attempt to keep (former) untouchables in the "Hindu fold", and for other possible humiliating connotations.

away from what he came to see as Gandhi's "bourgeois and Puritan doctrine on the free wild people of the forests" (in Guha 1999: 105). Elwin's efforts after Independence henceforth focused on protecting "tribals" and keeping them apart from Hindu society to help preserve their cultural distinctiveness. Almost anyone commenting on Elwin's work has noted he was a romantic and his own words leave little doubt about it. Doing his best to document the various arts forms, rituals, and cosmologies of the "tribal" communities he lived with, he lamented that in matters of art the "great days of the Indian tribesman are gone; all we can do now is search in the debris for traces of inspiration and scraps of beauty" (Elwin in Guha 1999: 307).

Confronted with the violence and hopelessness experienced by those loosing out in the process of further incorporation into capitalist, often "Hindu" networks of exploitation and dispossession, it is logical that Elwin – unlike Ghurye who hardly ever set foot outside his university office – saw integration into "Hindu" society as the problem rather than the solution to tribal poverty. Elwin did not, however, defend his "tribals" purely in ethnographic terms: often, he spoke rather of his role as that of "the true Dinabandhu [friend of the poor]", who "lives among the poor… learns to love them as people" and no longer thinks of them "as 'masses' to be uplifted with a vague and too-often sterile enthusiasm" (in Guha 1999: 183). Verrier's own, lived commitment to adivasi communities did, however, sometimes make him willfully blind to changes that would interfere with his celebration of them as cultures uncontaminated by "civilization": at the very time of his writing that praised the Gonds for being all that Gandhi's Puritanism was not, a Gandhian-style movement of renouncing liquor-drinking, meat-eating, dancing and singing, was sweeping through the Gond community that was, according to Hardiman (2004), initiated chiefly by certain Gonds themselves in defiance of members of their own community, local landlords, and liquor dealers. Elwin's resistance to Ghurye and Gandhi's line on the "tribal question" hence often ended up deepening the essentialist colonial ideas attached to the notion of the tribe. A number of anthropologists today still see themselves as following in the footsteps of Elwin and consider it a "radical" position to defend the fact that tribes have a rich "culture" of their own. What they fail to acknowledge is that this exercise is merely social evolutionism on its head and "radical" only in relation to the staunchest racist interpretations of what "adivasiness" is about.

Between Nehru and Elwin on one side and Gandhi and Ghurye on the other, the ethnographic notion of the tribe hence managed to carry over into Independent India. It remained a notion of cultural distinctiveness and essential difference, now justified either as respecting cultural uniqueness or as necessary for targeted efforts to redress economic and educational disadvantage (McMillan 2005: 126). Some scholars, such as Beteille (1998), have objected that the "Scheduled Tribe" that is the legal category by which people in need of either such

protection or development are identified, is merely intended to implement policy and does not pretend to pass judgment on the substantive history or present-day lifestyle of the groups denoted as such. This argument, however, is hardly tenable. Despite the randomness with which certain groups were historically determined "Scheduled Tribes" or "Scheduled Castes"[19] and despite the "adjustments" of the list to correct for "mistakes" or simply to take into account new realities,[20] the power of the connection between "Scheduled Tribe" status and substantive identity claims is such that I have only ever heard people without any education make a distinction between who they "are" and "what the government calls us".

Interestingly, the person perhaps most directly responsible for the contemporary importance of "Scheduled Tribe" status in India was also someone whose views generally transcended integrationist and the romantic answers to the "tribal question". Precisely for this reason, however, dr. Ambedkar is hardly ever acknowledged as having taken part in the debate on the tribal question. Most scholars and politicians recognize the fact that the majority of people classified as "tribes" are organized, as almost everyone in India, into castes (*jatis*) negotiating their position in particular regional caste hierarchies. Yet few thereby recognize the importance of what Amebdkar called "the annihilation of caste" for the so-called tribal question. Ambedkar explicitly talked of how the poverty and exclusion experienced by "what are called the aboriginal tribes in India" was produced by the same set of norms oppressing what we would today call "dalits" (Ambedkar 2002: 270): the caste mentality of "Indifferentism" towards anyone not belonging to one's caste that constantly hampered efforts of creating solidarity amongst the "oppressed" to overturn the deepening of caste inequality under capitalism. Ambedkar was strongly against Gandhi's efforts to "reform" (and thereby protect) the caste system and bourgeois property relations and envisioned a "bahujan" alliance that would bring together all the victims of the ruling structures (Omvedt 2009).

As Anand Teltumbde has shown, Ambedkar was committed to a "caste-class experiment" (2010: 14) and started his political trajectory by forming the now generally forgotten Independent Labour Party (ILP) precisely on this basis. This ILP was, moreover, the first political party in direct opposition to Congress and for the elimination of caste while the Communist party in fact grew out of Congress and was generally reluctant to emphasize the need to abolish caste (ibid.). It was only when "the entire political climate was becoming communalized" (Teltumbde 2010:

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19 And the fact that many communities bearing the same name – and considering themselves a unity – but living in different administrative districts today have different legal statuses; and the fact that "tribal" status bizarrely evaporates when so-called "tribes" travel outside of the region where they are registered as such.

20 A "tribe" whose members manage to become successful farmers for instance can be re-classified as a "Scheduled Caste" or an "Other Backward Caste".

14) in the 1920s in negotiations with the British administration that Ambedkar, reluctantly, floated a caste-based platform, the Scheduled Caste Federation (SCF), only to return to his initial strategy with the founding of the Republican Party of India "as soon as [the SCF's] utility was over" (ibid.). Indeed, the challenges for Ambedkar of maintaining a "bahujan" alliance in face of the politics of divide and rule proved too much at times. This, plus the fact that Ambedkar was trained as a lawyer (with a MsC from the LSE and the PhD from Columbia), contributed to his retreat into efforts at reform from above, institutionalized through the Constitution rather than forced from below – a retreat that, as Teltumbde (2010) points out, most of his followers now ironically see as his main political contribution to the Dalit cause. Ambedkar was not naïve or silent, however, about his turn to reform from above. At the time of the adoption of the Constitution, which had been drafted under his primary supervision, he explicitly stated that: "On 26th of January 1950, we are going to enter into a life of contradictions. In politics we will have equality and in social and economic life we will have inequalities". He warned, that "We must remove this contradiction at the earliest possible moment or else those who suffer from inequality will blow up the structure of our political democracy". As he himself admitted, rather than blowing up the structure of injustice, his constitutional efforts had contributed to providing the legal measures, primarily in the form of what are in India called "reservations" for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (i.e. reserved quotas in education, civil service, and seats in parliament and other elected bodies), for the formal equality of communities fixed ethnographically and economically in relations of marked inequality. The competition for the status of "Scheduled Tribe" that has been the outcome of this measure is perhaps the most telling legacy of Ambedkar's retreat at the time from more radical challenges to the ethnographic state.[21]

A second type of challenge against the ethnographic state on the "tribal question" – again usually not recognized as such – are the various agrarian revolts in which people categorized as "tribal" played a leading role but that have later become labeled into two apparently exclusive categories: either "tribal" or, more usually, "Naxal". Though Naxals are now mostly known as urban educated activists trying to spread Maoism to the countryside, the original revolt at Naxalbari that they derive their name from was an outgrowth of local organizing by sharecroppers and landless workers from various backgrounds - tribal, lower-caste, and Muslim, - supported by the CPI(M) and its peasant union (Frankel 2005: 378). The revolt

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[21] Ambedkar's struggle against the Hindu legitimation of caste ended in a similar dilemma. Having long announced he would not die a Hindu, Ambedkar for years managed to resist the urge to fix himself in any other category but near the end of his life, made the decision that within the hegemonic frame of fixed, religious categories he should make his point by converting to another religion – that of Buddhism.

continued when the CPI(M) withdrew its support in order to enter the United Front government. "Direct action" against landlords charged with evicting tenants (share-croppers) or hoarding uncultivated lands (which could be distributed to landless laborers) was started in March 1967 and initially succeeded without any violence. On May 23rd, however, a policeman and nine demonstrators died in a clash. It is telling how when the death of the demonstrators is described, they are generally referred to as "tribals" (e.g., Ray 1988: 98) whereas when subsequently the agitation took on the characteristics of an armed struggle, the demonstrators are generally referred to merely as "peasants" and a clear distinction is made between "tribals" and "extremists" (ibid: 99; see also Frankel 2005: 378).

The shift towards ignoring the "tribal" background of the peasant partly reflects the fact that China had discovered the events as a "Spring Thunder" and radical students and workers' organizations started to ally with the movement at Naxalbari (against the line of the CPI(M) in power). From September 1967 onwards, these "radicals", charging the CPI(M) with suppressing the agrarian revolutionary struggle, left the party in large number in Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal and became collectively identified as "Naxalites", gradually overshadowing the role that people called "tribals" had played. In the course of time – and clearly reflected in the debates on contemporary Naxalite militancy in Central India – Naxalbari was remembered as a Maoist revolt that had "used" tribals or – at best – had "exploited the dynamism of tribal.. sentiments" and the "unsettled tribal question" (Fic 1970: 419) to make people participate in the struggle. The idea fit both the urban activists claiming the leadership over the movement as well as its opponents, ranging from the CPI(M) to Congress, eager to condemn the "extremists" while claiming the moral high ground in defending "innocent tribals". Naxalbari hence forms a typical moment in which a movement set to confront various axes of inequality outside of the legal categories set by the state eventually becomes reinterpreted so that "tribals" remained in their role of primitive Others. Though posing a major democratic challenge to the post-colonial state and reminding it of the consequences of ignoring the inequalities in Indian society, the Naxalite movement could not succeed in rescuing a large part of its participants from falling prey to hegemonic "ethnographic" lenses of interpretation.

2.2   VICISSITUDES OF THE "TRIBE" IN KERALA STUDIES

Kerala occupies a particular position in the historical trajectory of the "tribe" in India. Contributing to this particularity is the fact that the percentage of Kerala's population classified as "Scheduled Tribes" (STs) hovers around a mere one and a half percent – a much smaller

percentage than is the case in India's North-Eastern states. Though concentrated in the hilly Eastern districts of Kerala, most of these "STs" live intermingled with and depend on (or often even, until the 1970s, were bonded to) other "non-ST" groups. The "congruence between tribal areas and tribal peoples"(McMillan 2005: 124), though problematic elsewhere, is almost entirely absent in Kerala. The state ought to, perhaps, have differed from the all-India scenario in another sense considering that the working-class—peasant alliance that led the struggle for independence in the territories now forming Kerala was not dismantled by a Gandhian alliance but became an equal heir of the freedom movement[22]. We might haveexpected that in such a context, the Communist movement might have gone ahead and challenged the effort to set aside part of the peasant or working-class population in a separate, essentializing "tribal" slot. Yetit is striking how despite Communist initiatives in the 1930s and 40s at organizing adivasi workers in the rubber and tea plantations that formed the backbone of colonial and later Congress political power in Kerala (Baak 1997), the Communist movement never managed to acknowledge the particular identities of these workers beyond the tribe-class dichotomy. To start to understand how this happened – a story that will unfold further in subsequent chapters – the present section focuses on the vicissitudes of Kerala's "tribes" in academic studies.

Ironically, in the former imperial centers[23], the anthropological notion of the "tribe" has become hotly contested today. Under the influence of decolonization and the new social movements of the late sixties – as well as the entry of many previously excluded population groups as students into the universities – anthropology there has undergone critical self-examination and re-conceptualization. Yet in Kerala, where the few institutionally affiliated anthropologists find themselves in a provincialized position vis-a-vis such developments in global academia and where anthropology continues to be a discipline with very few students in general and no critical mass of working-class and/or "tribal" students[24], the discipline remains institutionalized in such a way to encourage little critical reflection on the historical relations of power shaping anthropology's main historical obsession with the "tribe". Consequently, anthropology in Kerala has hardly managed to move beyond the paradigm of isolationist "tribal ethnographies" that consider the only possible historical agency "tribes" may have as lying in the defense of their

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[22] Nehru even initially embraced the Communist movement as he hoped that in the context of the Cold War it would allow India to provide a shining example of the "peaceful co-existence" of capitalism and socialism (Fic 1970: 77 ff).

[23] This formulation – rather than "the West" – is deliberate since in Germany, which had no overseas colonies and instead developed historically as their chief adversary, such rethinking has hardly happened. Consequently, German academia continues as a major source for the social authorization of essentialist theories on India's "tribes".

[24] There is an increasing number of "Scheduled Tribe" students in anthropology yet without critical mass and with the experience of steep upward mobility making them less eager to acknowledge the economic realities of ordinary "adivasis", they still often embrace cultural essentialist theories.

culture as described by the anthropologist. It is only outside of the discipline of anthropology that the rise of the AGMS has encouraged scholars to think of adivasis differently. The general neglect of anything related to the people defined as "adivasi" in other than anthropological sciences has started to be redressed. Gradually we hence see a move away from the traditional ethnographic paradigm within which studies related to adivasis have been caught., though without a confrontation with the paradigm. The following is a sketch of the trajectory of adivasi studies in Kerala.

Far from giving an exhaustive overview of the knowledge on "adivasis" produced in Kerala, the following merely traces academic trends as they developed in the course of the historical developments in Kerala society. The aim here is hence not to discuss the substantive history of the social groups now classified as "tribal" in Kerala. There is a lack of reliable historical sources documenting the ethnogenesis of various groups in Kerala and such an undertaking is not, moreover, necessary to the study of how the existing knowledge we do have has shaped our understanding of "tribes". There is for instance a huge, three-volume survey as part of the Anthropological Survey of India by K S Singh that lists all "communities" of Kerala. Yet, since it discusses each community separately,[25] it is unsuitable for the kind of ethnogenesis that I might otherwise pursue, relating local to world history in studying how particular communities evolve and transform.

"Tribes" in Kerala moreover seem to have different substantive histories whose commonality lies more in having become defined as "tribal" than in the livelihoods they pursue or their position in society. The Kurichia, for instance, generally live from farming their land which until recently was owned and managed in large matriarchal joint-families. Kurichias claim upper-caste status and are known to have participated in the second Pazhassy Revolt of 1800-1805 of the ruler of Kottayam, the Pazhassi Raja, against the British move to take possession of Wayanad. During the eventual crushing of the revolt, Talakkal Chandu, "the Kurichiya hero" serving as a lieutenant to the Pazhassi Raja (Sreedhara Menon 2007: 332) became a martyr remembered to this day. The Kattunaikans, by contrast, are mostly people who used to live by collecting, living of and selling forest products such as honey and are amongst the people most affected by the colonial establishment of protected forest reserves, which today continue to be managed by the Indian Forest Department. The Paniya and the Adiya on the other hand are only "wage hunter-

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[25] K S Singh (2002: xxi) in fact suggests he has overcome the tendency of treating castes and tribes as isolates and describing them synchronically rather than diachronically. The "correction" of this tendency however lies merely in an introductory paragraph in which taboos vis-à-vis other communities are outlined, plus a few words on the "modern" aspirations and amenities of communities at the end of each of the 220 chapters dealing with a particular "community".

gatherers" (Breman 2006). They are generally landless agricultural laborers who seem to have been such for many generations and perhaps for as long as they are known as "Paniya" (literally meaning "worker) and "Adiya" (literally meaning "slave"). About the origins of the Paniya in particular, the wildest theories have been launched, from the idea that they might be "of African origin and descended from ancestors who were wrecked on the Malabar coast" (Thurston 1975) to the idea that they were wild forest dwellers parasitically living off the produce of other people's land. What is more interesting, and plausible, is that they have become closely interconnected with the plantation industry that the British set up in Wayanad, for which they were eager to mobilize labor and all the more so "tribal" labor[26] since "tribals" would have no need for decent wages or living conditions but were desperately in need of being "civilized" and liberated from their lazy habits (Phillip 2003). How all these various groups – and many others – came to fall under the same category of the "tribe" has perhaps less to do with *their* history and more with the history of the more powerful officers and academics responsible for such definitions. It is hence to a critical examination of that history in Kerala that I turn here.

2.2.1   *THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL TRIBE IN KERALA: A HAPPY PEOPLE WITHOUT ANY HISTORY?*

Anthropology in Kerala has not been the site of dynamic change or politicization. It has, and continues to be, dominated by culturalists. Written work still often comes in the form of "tribal ethnographies", systematically detailing[27], in encyclopedic fashion, the social structure, religious beliefs and practices, material culture, marriage and death rituals, and sometimes the political organizing or historical deeds of particular tribes, usually self-admittedly based on a few days or at most a week or two of interaction with the "tribe". Usually, the work is directly commissioned by the government and prefaced by a government official lauding the anthropologist's work. Though the overt racist methods used in early tribal ethnographies– such as the cataloguing of

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[26] As Paul Erik Baak describes, the British had varying degrees of success in mobilizing "tribal" labor. Some communities labelled "tribal" seem to have been particularly reluctant to serve as plantation labor and the total number of people in some of the hilly areas where plantations were started was often not enough for the required number of laborers. Mobilizing labor from the coastal areas also however proved difficult since many ex-slaves were still tied, through obligations but also a level of security in times of need, to landlords in the nineteenth century and moreover were not enticed to face the confinement and bad living conditions of the plantations surrounded by forest (Baak 1997: 94 ff.).

[27] There are even "scientific" formats for this kind of documentation and one of the "great achievements" of Krishna Iyer (whom we will meet later on in this section) was, according to K S Singh (2002: xxi) to simplify the British official H.H. Risley's 27-point format for the ethnographic survey of India into a 14-point one.

nasal indices—have lost appeal[28], more subtle (and thereby sometimes all the more powerful) forms of racist methodology persist, for instance in the fact that observations of "culture" or "behavior" are seldom linked to social relations of power. Anthropologists in Kerala have moreover shown no interest in a paradigmatic break with the past of their discipline that has incarcerated "tribes" in a primordial definition. Anthropologists seem to remain content to substitute racism by romanticism while relying on their colonial predecessors as if the conditions under which those produced their knowledge mattered nothing for its validity (Philip 2007). In this section of the chapter, I will briefly sketch the history of the "tribe" in anthropological studies of Kerala.

In the early colonial period there was little conceptual clarityon the usage of the terms "caste" and "tribe" in Kerala. One of the earliest colonial documents on Kerala, the *Malabar Manual* of 1887 by William Logan[29] refers to the Nayars, today known as one of the dominant, upper-caste communities in Kerala, as a "tribe" (1887: 214). For some of the groups who eventually ended up on the list of Scheduled Tribes, the term "jungle tribe" is used yet the use of the term was rather indeterminate as Logan for instance talks of "jungle tribes and other servile castes" (1887: 37), displaying little attention to the difference,which later became so crucial, between "tribe" and "caste". In another instance, Logan treats the term "tribe" as if referring to differences in race or language rather than reference to a distinct way of life, relative isolation or any of the other characteristics nowadays associated with "tribes", saying it is "probably correct ... that in 'early times' the present almost innumerable sub-divisions of castes did not exist and that a large number [of these sub-castes] are mere repetitions of castes in another tribe and language" (1887: 109). When mentioning "aborigines" (1997: 147), Logan interestingly does so in relation to Cherumas, whom today are considered dalits.

After the turn of the century, works documenting Kerala society were still repeating the view that the castes whom nowadays identify as dalit were the aborigines of the area but developed a more rigid division of castes and tribes and gradually increased the emphasis on the difference between these groups. One such works is Thurston's 1909 *Castes and tribes of Southern India*. Thurston was a British administrator but also Superintendent of Ethnography and chair of the

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[28] A number of anthropologists and Indologists, inside as well as outside India, however continue to profess fascination to an interlocutor like me for the different skull types of the "tribes".

[29] William Logan was the special commissioner appointed in 1881 to enquire into land tenure and tenant rights in Malabar (the Northern region of what is now Kerala, then ruled directly from Chennai/Madras), following the revolts by predominantly Muslim ("Mapilla") tenant farmers in the area. Interestingly, Logan was inclined to argue *against* culturalist arguments – in his report on the Mapilla uprising he refused to go along with culturalist arguments depicting the Mapilla riots as communal (Muslim vs Hindu) riots and in stead pointed to the large-scale dispossession of Mapilla tenants' rights that had preceded the riots.

Madras Museum. A more bounded notion of "hill tribes" as at the same time denoting the aborigines of Kerala emerges in his ethnography as well as a certain obsession – common in physical anthropology in Europe at the time -- with measuring people's noses, skulls, and other physical exteriors in order to substantiate racial theories that saw such measures of body-parts as a guide to the status of their owners (Shah 2007: 1808). Elaborate tables of average, maximum, and minimum stature and nasal index form the introduction of Thurston's book, accompanied with description of various tribes, such as for example the "jungle Chenchus" who "still exhibit the primitive short stature and high nasal index, which are characteristic of unadulterated jungle tribes" (1909: xlvii). Amongst subsequent "indigenous" ethnographers, such as Anantha Krishna Iyer, considered the "father of South Indian ethnology" and one of the erstwhile collaborators of Thurston, anthropology became less obsessed with physical measurements but all the more inclined to confirm old hierarchies. Anantha Krishna Iyer, himself a Brahmin, for instance widely publicized on how in his home region of Kerala he found "Negroid features in the types among the hillmen and the agrestic serfs, and Dravidian features among the people of the plains, and fine Aryan characteristics among the people of the higher castes" (1925: 49-51).

It was only when this type of race anthropology finally got discredited in Europe after the holocaust that nasal indexing and other measuring of physical exteriors was eventually dropped, also in Kerala. Later ethnographies, such as A. D. Luiz (1962) *Tribes of Kerala*, shifted from a preoccupation with the physical to the "cultural" aspects of the different "tribes". As such, they continued to produce a more enlightened and supposedly more "indigenous" form of colonial knowledge that continued to place "adivasis" as the bottom rung of civilization and outside of history. Interestingly, the sixties in Kerala were also a period of great Communist-led turmoil in the field of Science, as scientific knowledge was being popularized on a massive scale through various literacy and science movements. Yet such popularization was mainly concerned with the *dissemination* of scientific information, with an emphasis on the physical sciences (Zachariah and Sooryamoorthy 1994). Little recognition of the importance of social science or of the need for more critical or dialectic methods of generating scientific knowledge entered into the mainstream of academia. The fact that academic Science was made available in Malayalam – rather than Sanskrit or English – was already such a break with the past that it was enough to be considered "revolutionary". The firm belief in the possibility of rational explanation, of cause and effect, was moreover considered progressive in relation to earlier religious dogma or superstition; the fact that all this Science allowed for little popular input or indeed other than Modernist political imagination was not generally considered as contradicting Communist ideals.

Keralese anthropology in the Cold War period hence reflected the staunchly modernist attitude to science that dominated both the capitalist West and communist East. This was, in Kerala, moreover a juncture in which the problem of racism in anthropological knowledge could remain largely unexplored. Since the Soviet block had supposedly not participated in – indeed, had been the historical victor over -- Nazi ideology of racial hierarchies, there was little urgency in USSR-centered academic networks of addressing the problem of racism (see Turda 2010). On the other hand, Kerala was not so strictly under Soviet influence that it followed its denouncement of "bourgeois" racial anthropology as incompatible with the new scientific theories in the Soviet Union or its condemnation, from the 1950s onward, of Mendelian genetics and eugenics as "capitalist sciences" (ibid.). Instead, an Englishman like J B S Haldane whose scientific contribution was to support the efforts to unite Darwinian evolutionary theory with Mendelian genetics was invited to inaugurate the Kerala Science Literary Society in 1962 (Zacharia and Sooryamoorthy 1994). Haldane was also an ex-Communist but it was not his socialism that attracted the organizers but rather his commitment to physical science and to sharing it with the general public (ibid. 1994: 57). The field of anthropology in Kerala hence managed to stay aloof both of the campaign against racial anthropology waging in the West, and the attack on "bourgeois" anthropology in the East. Moreover, as in most Third World countries, anthropology was a marginal discipline of little interest to a wider political public for its apparent irrelevance to the grand goals of the post-war "developing" world: eradicating poverty and producing what in Kerala is known as "*vikasanam*" (development).[30]

The Communist movementdid however indirectly enable some persons of lower-caste background to enter the utmost bastion of upper-caste power that was academia. In anthropology, Aiyyappan, a scholar of Izhava (erstwhile untouchable, now "OBC") descent became an important new such voice. Unlike his upper-caste predecessors, he spent considerable time with ordinary people, showing interest in their hopes, aspirations and dilemmas and refusing to reduce these to a particular reified generality of their community background. His writings repeatedly reveal his desire to confront the inequalities he encountered (and knew all too well from his own background). Yet in starting his ethnography of the Paniya – and in many other instances -- he uses rather classic formulations: "Paniyas are a happy people without any history". Why he does so is unclear but it may reflect a compromise with the continuing hegemony of such depictions of "tribals", also in his time. Hence also with Aiyyappan, the tribal ethnography paradigm does not end. He does pay more attention to the exploitation of the Paniya in contemporary society and the historical development of this

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[30] *Vikasanam* literally means "expansion" but has been adopted in Kerala as the Malayalam referent for "development".

condition. He moreover is one of the first to focus his ethnography on the Paniya, a group of proletarian, "black" adivasis not generally considered worthy of elaborate study. In studying the Paniya, Aiyyappan even comes to the conclusion that "there is no sociological reason" why certain tribes would not be considered castes. Yet he is reluctant (and understandably so) to confront the paradigm of tribal ethnography and its biases and sometimes even tempted to reproduce some of its most evolutionary stereotypes.

In the 1980s we find new attempts to critique the categorical essentialization of castes and tribes in the study of Kerala, though again these stop short of confronting the established paradigm. Brian Morris, based at the LSE in London, for instance writes his 1982 "*Socio-economic study of the Hill Pandaram*", largely in the tradition of the tribal ethnography. In his introduction, he argues that even regarding the so-called "primitive" hunter-gathering tribe he focuses on "in economic terms there seems to be no essential difference ... between a caste and a tribe" (1982: 55) and that "forest communities have not, within historical times at least, been 'isolates' from the wider Hindu culture" (ibid:11). He also argues that in South India there is generally no substantive sociological distinction between so-called "tribes" and "castes" and suggests that talking about a certain "tribe can be taken as the same as talking about a particular "community" – "merely as a descriptive tag for a group of people who see themselves as forming a cultural unit" (Morris 1982: 38). An intellectual confrontation with the oppressive legacies carried on in the notion of the "tribe" is however avoided. Hence whereas other communities have come to be understood in more relational and dynamic terms – a clear break with the essentialist paradigm being for instance the work by Osella and Osella (2000)on the strategies of upward mobility of the (becoming) Izhava community - "adivasis" continue to be taken as communities preeminently suited for the reifying kind of ethnographies that cut them loose from the development of the rest of Kerala, seek to "preserve" their culture, and hold them up as an interesting species of humanity.

The epistemological understanding of adivasis as separate, isolated historical remnants that is reproduced in the genre of the tribal ethnography thereby continues to lend academic respectability to what have become common-sensical lenses through which tribal people are seen in Kerala. I realized this when in 2005 I interviewed P.R.G. Mathur, one of the most internationally celebrated anthropologists of Kerala and author of the 1977 "*Tribal situation in India*", a volume containing classical ethnographies of a large number of "tribes". Asking him what he knew about the AGMS, he complained of C K Janu's "lack of commitment to the issue of unwed adivasi mothers" – a term generally referring to the phenomenon understood as

"outsiders" sexually abusing adivasi women and abandoning them as soon as they become pregnant.[31] According to Mathur, C K Janu ought to have "committed suicide" over this issue that, he feared, was likely to signal "the end of the adivasis". He apparently assumed "unwed adivasi mothers" were simply "hapless victims"[32] and worried about the "racial" mixing that would occur and would logically spell "the end of the adivasis". I could not help but hear an echo of Thurston's anxiety that "the purity of blood and ethnological characters of various jungle tribes are unhappily becoming lost as the result of contact metamorphosis from the opening up of the jungles for planter's estates, and contact with more civilized tribes and races, both brown and white" (Thurston 1909: xlvii). Coming with all the authority of what many people had assured me was Kerala's "most prominent" living anthropologist, I realized how anthropology continued to feed the stereotypical, dehumanized portrayals of adivasis – and particularly adivasi women – that I daily encountered in blogs and media or could hear ordinary people I spoke to rehearse.

Representing tribal people as threatened, "innocent" remnants of a better past offers the anthropologist the role of "documenting" these lost cultures and their problems to thereby help "preserve" them but deprives the people living under this sign of any contemporary relevance. The paradigm of the tribal ethnography hence helps introduce a political schism between adivasi activists and the grand majority of people in Kerala – certainly those "educated" into the main script on "tribal innocence". The consequent deafness to adivasi activists' actual political interventions is intense enough that the few instances where politicians strategically decide to show a different attitude – notably during 2003 when Congress Chief Minister A K Anthony showed himself prepared to negotiate directly with C K Janu– have a strong emotional impact on activists. So much so that for a long time it made the AGMS leadership more positively inclined towards Congress than towards the CPI(M), despite the strong historical antagonism between Congress and most subaltern activists and despite the fact that earlier that year A K Anthony had been the one who ordered the forceful eviction of a major land occupation organized by the AGMS.

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[31] Marriama Kalathil's (2004) study of "unwed mothers" amongst the Irular in Attappady echoes the exact same concerns. Typically, it mentions only extreme cases such as a nine year old "charming, beautiful and innocent" girl who "who fell pray to the lust of a settler" (58) and never suggests that something other than deception might drive the women to relate to wealthier neighbors.

[32] Mathur had also not taken the effort of following what the AGMS had actually been doing as C K Janu had addressed the issue of "unwed mothers" several times explicitly in public speeches. It is true, however, that she did not -- as she explained to me during an interview -- give it the prominence that what she called "civil society" expected her to give to the issue considering the fact that she was unsure publicizing the issue would do the "unwed mothers" much good and moreover argued that the phenomenon was part of the general oppression of adivasis that the AGMS was addressing.

The impact of ethnographic knowledge is also pronounced in the more mundane politics of communities' competition for status and benefits in Kerala. How direct a role colonial ethnographic knowledge plays in this became particularly clear to me when I spoke with people from a community of small farmers identifying as "Kunduvadians". This group had previously been on the Scheduled Tribe list but had become "OBCs" (Other Backward Castes) when their local leader – purportedly behind everyone's backs -- had lobbied the government to remove their community from the ST list: he had been eager to sell his land to set up a cinema but was not permitted to do so as long as he had the status of being an "ST".[33] The Kunduvadians were now trying to get back on the list as the agricultural crisis had confirmed to them the need to seek other venues of mobility and access the educational benefits reserved for Scheduled Tribes. One of the men who had been active in this endeavor to become re-admitted to the list, explained to me in detail how they had argued for their right to be on the Scheduled Tribes list to KIRTADS, the governmental body in Kerala that is the first institution on the way to modifying centrally ordained tribal status. They had two telling pieces of evidence of their "adivasi" belonging. The first was the fact that many of them suffered from the hereditary disease of sickle-cell anemia. Though there is obviously nothing "tribal" about the illness, the obsession about race and genetics in colonial accounts of tribal groups explains why such random genetic traits would come to be considered "evidence" of tribal belonging. The second piece of "evidence" was a book carried around with great care, containing a detailed description of the community as "tribal" and pictures of their "tribal" forefathers. The book, which was to be sent all the way to the prime-minister in Delhi as conclusive "evidence", turned out to be C. Gopalan Nair's *Wayanad: its peoples and traditions* (1911), another meticulous documentation by an upper-caste colonial ethnographer of different "castes and tribes" in Northern Kerala.

The only place within anthropology where a cautious move away from the enduring colonial academic tradition of knowledge production related to "tribes" in Kerala seems to be taking place is on the edges of the discipline, particularly in "applied anthropology". Vineetha Menon (2009), head of the department of anthropology at Kannur University, has in connection to the "tribal question" breached the topic of knowledge and power and introduced Foucauldian arguments on their necessary interrelatedness. This allows her to question dominant forms of knowledge in contemporary state practices, to which applied anthropology, she argues, can be a corrective. She hence shows how a notion like the "*oorukuttam*", often taken as a primordial "tribal" institution, is in fact "a new composition of tribal people, but using a traditional nomenclature", mobilized by the government of Kerala in its decentralized planning campaign

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[33] As a "protective" measure, "tribals" cannot legally sell their land to non-tribals.

(2009:110). Leaving behind arguments on tribal haplessness and innocence, Menon argues that people agree to the institution for strategic reasons. For the discipline of anthropology in Kerala, this is almost a revolutionary step in that it moves resolutely away from taking state-produced knowledge on "tribes" for granted. Yet, it is at the same time limited in that there is no question of the complicity of anthropology in producing this knowledge historically. Hence Menon notes that the "identity perception" of "adivasis" is now in motion but ignores its complexities in the past, arguing these identities used to be "simple and elementary" (2009: 112). For critical anthropology to not just follow the (political) facts as they develop but actually contribute to the challenging of inequalities substantiated and managed through common-sense knowledge, it will need to go a step further and realize that tribal – or any other – "identities" were never "simple and elementary" but always part of hegemonic projects and their contestation.

2.2.2 *THE INDIGENIST CHALLENGE TO THE ETHNOGRAPHIC TRIBE*

Though within anthropology itself, the tradition of writing isolated and static "tribal ethnographies" largelycontinues, with only minor adjustments, under the influence of the rise of the AGMS it has become undeniable that many of the people considered "tribal" are not isolated or stuck in the past and are in fact setting an agenda that addresses modern Kerala society. It is remarkable that it was only in the course of the 90s, as the AGMS was mobilizing, and more so from 2001 onward, when its large demonstration in Thiruvanathapuram for the first time gave it massive media coverage, that disciplines other than anthropology started to pay attention to "adivasis". In this last section of this chapter, I will give a brief overview of the most significant publications outside of anthropology that have been inspired by the rise of the AGMS. The overview, starting with activist publications and moving to literary and cinematography studies, biographical works, political economy and development studies, is certainly not exhaustive but is merely meant to give an impression of some of the ways in which in fields other than anthropology, the AGMS seems to have inspired a degree of deviance from the ethnographic state.

Activist studies of the adivasi movement in Kerala, though theoretically sometimes eclectic, set the tone for a different approach to the study of "tribal" issues in Kerala. Particularly active in this is C R Bijoj, a Malayalee activist-intellectual based in Coimbatoire (Tamil Nadu), who has written a string of pamphlets and papers on the adivasi movement in South India from his close experience and cooperation in the movement. *A search for justice: A citizen's report on the adivasi experience in South India*, published in 1997 and written by Anita Cheria, C R Bijoj, K Narayanan and Edwin was a break-through in that it presented the experiences of "adivasi"

communities as part of the general directions that Kerala society was moving in and, consequently, also posed the challenges thrown up by adivasi leaders as concerning society in general. In the course of the 2000s, an increasing number of activist publications by dalit intellectuals, often with due attention to adivasi politics, started adding to this collection – a notable contribution being the work of T G Jacob and P. Bandhu (2002) on dalit-adivasi movements in South India and later on the crisis in Wayanad, the state with the highest concentration of "adivasis"(T G Jacob 2006). There was also an increasing attention for adivasis from documentary filmmakers. C Saratchandan for instance powerfully documented and publicized the story of the Muthanga Struggle[34] in his *Evicted from Justice.*

Besides activists, some academicshave also now started paying attention to the political challenge posed by the AGMS. The most decisive break with the tradition of ethnographic knowledge on "tribes" in Kerala comes from the discipline of literary studies in a thesis for the University of Hyderabad by K C Bindu, entitled "Constructing the adivasi identity: Reading the dominant, reading the adivasi". It is, to my knowledge, the first explicitly self-reflexive and critical study from Kerala that, though based on fieldwork, does not seek to document adivasi lives or reflect an "authentic adivasi voice" but rather studies the "various cultures which have constructed the adivasi identity, including the Malayalee, upper-caste, Hindu culture of which I am part...[and] the academic culture which draws its life breath from the Western notions of the "primitive"...[to which] I can claim a membership..too" (ibid.). In her work K C Bindu directly addresses "the sharp division that emerged with the tribe as outside caste" that "appears as a shadow" to "the imagination of India as a conglomeration of castes". Her work is path-breaking in Kerala as it critically examines the way that the "tribe" is constructed in contemporary as well as historical debates in Kerala (and India) as "a site to critique modernity" (2003: 22).

In the past decade, within the disciplines of literary and cinematographic studies there has also been a move to deploy the genre of the biography to describe adivasi (and dalit)lives. This is a novel development in that earlier, with few exceptions, only upper-caste lives weredeemed worthy of such detailed attention. New is also how these life stories automatically, by giving a view into lived reality, help break the stale and romanticized imaginary surrounding "tribals". The most elaborate biography to appear so far of an adivasi activist is C K Janu's biography, *Mother Forest,* written by Bhaskaran. As the title signals, the author does to some extent work within the tradition of depicting tribal people as remnants of a beautiful but vanishing past. He

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[34] The "Muthanga Struggle" refers to the occupation of the Muthanga wildlife in 2003, led by the AGMS, which was eventually violently evicted by the police. In subsequent chapters, I will talk in more detail about this struggle.

even does his best to emphasize the "innocence" of C K Janu bywriting the first part of the biography in a literary style that avoids capitals, punctuation and complicated sentences, meant to thereby remain close to C K Janu's own words,though running the danger of having readers mistake the sarcasm and wit that characterizes Janu's speech[35]for a wondering, naive attitude. Yet despite these romantic literary interventions, simply by being a biography *Mother Forest*inevitably introduces the reader to the contradictions, interdependencies, and aspirations in the life of an Adiya woman that "tribal ethnographies" focusing on a "tribe" rather than on the experiences of a tribal person ignore. In the biographical genre, noteworthy is also the work by Brigitte Schulze, a German cinematography professor, who made an extensive internet archive of transcribed interviews with adivasi and dalit activists, forming one of the first English-language sources with literal transcriptions of interviews with adivasi activists on the stories of their lives and political aspirations. Even more noteworthy is the film *Guda* she helped to produce in 2003 together with K J Baby, the director of an alternative school for adivasi children in Wayanad, which centers the coming-of age of an adivasi girl in Wayanad. For the first time in Malayalee cinema, Paniya and Kuttunaikan children act the lead roles in the movie and even helped produce it.

Publications in other disciplines than literature and cinematography make less of a break with colonial constructions of adivasiness in Kerala and usually continue to treat "tribes" and "castes" as absolutely dichotomous entities. What we do see, however, is that following the rise of the AGMS, economics, political science and development studies have had increasing attention for "tribes", which in itself is a novelty as other disciplines than anthropology hardly ever took notice of these groups.[36]Together with C R Bijoj, Ravi Raman - a political economist by training - helped bring attention to the Muthanga struggle in an article in the *Economic and Political Weekly* and Raman was one of the first to bring the adivasi struggle in Kerala to an international academic audience with his sympathetic description of the struggle in *Social Analysis.* More theoretical but equally engaged contributions followed from political science, amongst which the article by K.K. Sreekumar and Govindan Parayil 'Interrogating Development: New Social Movements, Democracy, and Indigenous People's Struggles in Kerala' (2006), which for the first time explicitly discussed the AGMS within the "new social movements" paradigm rather than as an instance of age-old "tribal rebellion".

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[35] Having interviewed C K Janu many times, this is certainly the impression I and my research assistants got from Janu and indeed, most people close to her describe her as witty and ironic rather than "innocent".

[36] A notable, exception is the work by professor of economics M. Kunhaman at Kerala University who wrote about "the tribal economy of Kerala" already in the 1980s.

Indigenist mobilization: 'Identity' versus 'class' after the Kerala model of development?

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In reaction to the government's renewed commitment to "tribal development" after the AGMS' 2001 demonstration, an increasing number of articles and books in development studieshave also focused on adivasi livelihoods. Darley Kjosavik, a Malayalee researcher based in Norway, was one of the first from within international development studies to focus on adivasi livelihoods and the challenge posed by the AGMS while remaining sympathetic to the achievements of the Kerala model of development. In 2006, J. Chathukulam and M.S. John awoke scholars outside of Kerala who engaged in the study of "tribal development" to recent developments within Kerala – a state usually ignored in the larger Indian debate. That same year *The Wayanad Initiative* appeared, a large-scale study commissioned by the government of Kerala to the *Indian Institute of Management* in Kozhikode on adivasi livelihoods in Wayanad. In fact, this government-commissioned study went further than most independent studies in deconstructing romantic culturalist notions of "tribal" life. It for instance explicitly stated that "being a 'tribe' in Wayanad does not have much to do with traditional customs and practices, but has much to do with the extent of their marginalization in [sic] social, economic and political domain. They can more or less be identified as a political entity or a socioeconomic formation than a cultural entity" (2006: 41). The political realist tone of the study – often confronting cultural stereotypes that most independent engaged scholars choose to silently abide by – quite significantly challenges the reigning paradigm on "adivasis". In contrast the independent academic study by Matthew Aerthayil (2008) *Impact of globalization on tribals in the context of Kerala* – one of the latest extensive contributions from development studies to the debate on tribal development in Kerala –stays much closer to the reigning notion of "tribals" in his effort to reconstruct changes to an apparently distinct"tribal livelihood" in the years since the liberalization of India's economy in 1991.

Hence we see thatthough within the discipline of anthropology, where "adivasis" used to be confined, the genre of the tribal ethnographyand its concomitant theoretical presumptions still reigns, with the rise of the AGMS other disciplines have taken an interest in "adivasi" livelihoods and movements and started producing knowledge that in style, and sometimes also in content, transcends the confines of traditional tribal ethnography. What remains to be done is anthropological work that helps to deconstruct the notion of the "tribe" and its associated prejudices in Kerala by showing the concrete contradictions that "adivasiness" poses for "adivasi" movements themselvesin the way that for instance Amita Baviskar and Alpha Shah have done for other parts of India. This is one of the challenges this dissertation takes up.

2.3   CONCLUSION

This chapter has not revealed the secret of where the people figuring in the rest of this dissertation "really" come from. It did not intend to do so. The question of the ethnogenesis of particular social groups in Kerala is certainly interesting, for one in revealing just to what extent and how social inequalities reproduce themselves over time. Yet the aim of this chapter was not to embark on the project of describing the ethnogenesis of particular groups but to trace the broader history of how and to what effect they came to be labeled as "tribals". The two processes – of ethnogenesis and categorization - may be interrelated but, contrary to popular and even much academic opinion, they are not the same. Describing how and to what effect people become known as "tribal" is precisely intended to demonstrate the nonsense of debating whether these people are "genuinely" tribal as well as to emphasize that the essential difference that the notion signals is a (govern)mental construct and not a useful tool to study historical relations. "Tribality" is a category born of Western fantasy and colonial imperatives backed up by certain currents of anthropology willing to lend it substantive analytical value and carried over into Independent India precisely by shaping the terms under which different social interests are contested. Government anthropologist in India continue to have to venture out on "fieldwork" trips, usually a few days at most, in order to watch people perform their "tribality" and accordingly make decisions on whether or not they should be registered as "Scheduled Tribes" in the Ethnographic Survey of India and receive the entitlements that come with that status.[37] What I have tried to do in this chapter is to help create more space for alternatives to this state gaze by deconstructing the taken-for-granted notion of the tribe and exposing the colonial and bourgeois baggage it carries with it, relying on the critical work done by scholars who have engaged in a similar agenda of historically deconstructing the "tribe".

There are limits, however, to historical deconstruction. Mere deconstruction seems to leave a vacuum that in the absence of the *re*construction of an alternative research agenda continues to allow the ethnographic state to fill the vacuum. That is why my dissertation does not stop at the deconstruction of the essentialist differences between tribes and non-tribes, "peoples" inside and peoples outside global capitalism, those fighting against the state versus those fighting to capture it, but continues to enquire into the reasons for the rise of indigenism as a form of politics mobilizing around the notion of the tribe and the effect of such mobilization. In the next

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[37] Townsend Middleton (2010) has done research on these contemporary ethnographic practices of government anthropologists, demonstrating how field visits are politically negotiated between power brokers of the supposed "tribe" and the politicians commissioning the government anthropologists who invariably are frustrated by what they then see as a "staged" rather than "genuine" performance of tribality.

chapter, however, I first follow up the historical deconstruction of the tribe in colonial and academic practice that I undertook here with a description of contemporary political mobilization around the notion in Kerala. My aim, again, is not to enquire into how contemporary lives of the people employing the notion of the tribe fit some authoritative definition of the term but rather to trace the more recent history of how certain social conflicts and desires came to be framed as concerning "adivasiness" and the various interpretations of and (international) influences on contemporary "adivasiness" in Kerala. In doing so, I will also suggest that contemporary indigenism in Kerala may belong to the kind of counter-hegemonic challenges against the ethnographic state that have in the past tended to be silenced under its hegemony.

CHAPTER 3

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING ADIVASI

The colonial baggage that has attached to the notion of the adivasi is something that continues to pose dilemmas for the Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha. Mobilizing as "adivasis" requires activist labor. This is not only because "Scheduled Tribes" constitute only about 1,5 percent of the population of Kerala - a fact that would make most mainstream political calculations in India conclude an "adivasi" movement would stand no chance in the state – but also because what it means to be adivasi is neither something that movement participants necessary agree on, nor something that is easily kept out of the realm of historically and globally-reinforced hegemonic interpretations. Activists generally see "adivasi" as similar to "dalit", both intended as explicitly political, "autonomous" references beyond established "caste" and "tribe" frames. Yet as we saw in the previous chapter, even the word "adivasi" is a literal translation of "aboriginal", taking it back to the colonial imaginary that often becomes an intangible part of activists' own ideas of what it is to be "adivasi". Some scholars worry in reaction that in shaping their political program around adivasiness, activists have inevitably entered a realm that will merely "reinforce rather than contradict the prejudices directed against them" (Bates 1995: 103). They worry that it will bring about a "return of the native" (Kuper 2003). This chapter focuses on the dilemmas that emerge as activists negotiate the contradictions of using an over-determined notion of "adivasiness" for the purpose of emancipatory praxis.

It will become clearer in this chapter why I use the notion of "indigenism", rather than "tribal politics" or "adivasi resistance", to capture the kind of intervention the AGMS is engaged in. I have done so precisely to emphasize activists' efforts to try and escape the ethnographic state and challenge political boundaries in two major ways. The first is the AGMS's effort to destabilize taken-for-granted notions of identity. Indigenism signals a politics that goes beyond the concern with categorization and exclusive identity – beyond the particular. It does exactly what Dipesh Chakrabarty on a cautionary note observes about global indigenous politics: that it operates at a "rhetorical" rather than strictly "referential" register, increasing in "use-value ...in proportion to the decrease in ... referential content"(2005: 240). When the AGMS refers to "ancestral land", a "tribal way of life", or "indigenous belonging", these phrases should be interpreted precisely in a rhetorical register, as references not to precise local realities but to social relations and ideals. The dynamist and ambiguity of the AGMS's interpretations are

precisely why the movement has contributed to the emergence of a new political block in Kerala as it allows for local specificities to become part of wider frames of reference and for political vision to override the short-term preoccupation with claiming exclusive benefits. Indigenist initiatives hence stand in contrast to "tribal solidarity movements … asserting political solidarity of a tribe or of a group of tribes vis-à-vis … non-tribals" (Sinha 2002: 252), "centered upon the deployment of a proven membership of specific and reified identities" (Cederlof and Sutton 2005: 161)[38]. I call the AGMS indigenist precisely for its transformative political agenda and capacity to upset the usual language in which political debate is conducted.

A second way in which the AGMS should be considered "indigenist" is its critical attitude toward the given past. Cultural stereotypes and "common sense" are not simply strategically confirmed in the AGMS but are actively reworked. This is particularly important since the AGMS, in basing its visions of the future on a specific interpretation of the past, necessarily runs into the problem of having to negotiate the historical baggage of the "tribe". If used too instrumentally, the AGMS risks confirming the perilous, hegemonic meaning of what "adivasi" politics is about. It moreover risks thereby ultimately disempowering itself since dominant readings of indigenous identityare often particularly awkward for the more proletarianized "indigenous people" who form the backbone of the AGMS (cp Baviskar 2005, Sylvain 2002, Robins 2003). The AGMS hence does not simply rely on tropes of tribal "innocence" but engages with more dialectical and therefore necessarilycontradiction-ridden (and vulnerable) interpretations of "adivasi" legacies. Its politics is indigenist as it goes to the heart of what Gerald Sider (2003: xiii) describes as the challenge of struggling "within, and also against, their own [indigenous] histories and their own cultures and simultaneously within and against the histories and cultures that others try so intensely to impose upon them" (Sider 2003: xiii).

I start this chapter with a discussion of the trajectory of the emergence of the AGMS as a chain of "framing" events through which poverty and landlessness became recognizable as part of the historical oppression of indigenous people. In the second section I then move on to discuss in more detail the various ways in which adivasiness has come to be understood in Kerala and how the AGMS tries to give adivasiness a more coherent and politically useful content through "conscientization" efforts. Concluding this chapter, I will reflect on the need to understand why despite – and perhaps *because of* – the ambiguous and very often not merely *counter*-hegemonic interpretations embedded in the notion of "adivasiness", it has nevertheless become a magnet for political action in Kerala.

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[38] Cederlof and Sutton (2005) observe this kind of dynamic in Tamil Nadu's adivasi politics.

3.1   BECOMING ADIVASI: TO FRAME OR TO BE FRAMED

The AGMS relies on a variety of interpretations of what it is to be adivasi, some of which contradict each other or even are internally contradictory. The balancing act of the AGMS is about how not to succumb to these contradictions, how to try and impose coherence without relying on the taken-for-grantedness of the notion of "adivasiness". The main tension in the AGMS, which both signals its core weaknesses and strengths, is probably that over time it has shown itself committed to an agenda determined predominantly by the interests of the landless agricultural laborers amongst Kerala's "Scheduled Tribes", yet has often had to rely on the authority of the ethnographic state, whose notions of adivasiness are much more amenable to other, less proletarianized adivasi communities. We see this play - of trying to make tribal imagery work for the AGMS while at the same time attacking the hegemonic practices it perpetuates - throughout the trajectory of the rise of the AGMS in the course of the 1990s and into the mid-2000s.[39]

I will describe the AGMS' trajectory here as the fruition of a considerable amount of "framing work": the work of shaping particular grievances onto broader and more resonant claims and tying different social conflicts together as requiring the same kind of (indigenist) challenge (Tarrow 1998: 21). This kind of readingis a common one in social movements studies but is not often applied to non-Western social movements. In India, social movements are still too often assumed to not involve much deliberate action or political choice and to be closer, rather, to traditional affiliations of kinship, caste, or ethnicity.Attention to the modernity of contemporary Indian forms of political contestation often gets lost in the confluence of the Dumontian interest in what makes India different from "Western democracies" – hierarchical values, a lack of (the myth of) individualism, a lack of separation between public and private – with the insistence in social movement studies on a strict definition of social movements as "an invention of the modern age and an accompaniment to the rise of the modern state" (Tarrow 1998: 2). Though it is criticalnot to interpret Indian realities simply through a "Western" lens and to give social movements a historical definition, these two concerns should not lead to a fixed interpretation of social movements in contemporary India as ritualistically performed claims to traditional social arrangements. Many Indian social movements today are in fact varieties of modern

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[39] Apart from my fieldwork notes and interviews, this section also draws on a collection of clippings from local and national newspapers from 1990 to 2010. For the period 1990-2005, these include all clippings from *The Hindu* and *The Indian Express* that referred to "adivasi" or "tribal" issues – a collection which I partly received from the librarian of *Solidarity*, an NGO working to promote literacy and political consciousness in Wayanad and which for the other part I complemented by systematically combing through newspapers that journalists and the CPI(M)'s archive in Thiruvanathapuram gave me access to.

political contestation, of claims-making and framing within a democratic polity. Indigenism as an emerging political block in Kerala relied precisely on challenging inscribed, traditional ideas of what it is to be "adivasi".

In India, claims-making does look differentthan in the contemporary West. Formal resemblance to "traditional" techniques of protest does not, however, mean the context and meaning of such protest remains unchanged. Many forms of protest in Western Europe today – the riot, the petition, or the demonstration – were equally part of traditional repertoires and have gained their "modern" meaning by their changing context, rather than form. The indigenist movement in Kerala has drawn extensively from the Indian protest repertoire: activists have organized *jathras*(marches,) *dharnas*, (sit-down strikes), the occasional*hartal*(a shut down strike whereby all economic activity comes to a halt), *gheraos* (encircling a public official), *bhook hartals* (hunger strikes), and even have resorted to the extreme of suicide through public immolation. Guha and Martinez-Alier (1997: 14) argue that many such Indian techniques are aimed –as they traditionally have been - towards "shaming the state". Yet this is not all they do. These techniques also include tactical and strategic considerations aimed at a modern liberal-democratic system. Take the *jail bharo andolan* or "jail fill movement", a demonstration whereby protesters deliberately seek arrest: in doing so they hope to embarrass the government about putting large numbers of its citizens in jail but also seek the tactical effect of filling up the jails, making future arrests more difficult, and thereby making ordinary people more willing to risk joining a demonstration (hence it is often undertaken the day before a large demonstration). Its symbolic effect is, moreover, undertaken not just with an eye to the Chief Minister or authorities but rather with public opinion, mass media, and voters foremost in mind.Despite the "traditional" forms of techniques, symbols, and discourses through which the AGMS usually represents itself, there is, as we will see, deliberate political work involved in producing the indigenist challenge in Kerala.

3.1.1 *ADIVASI MOBILIZATION IN THE SHADOW OF THE ST LAND ACT*

From the early years of what became the Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha, it encountered the dilemma of framing an "adivasi" movement using established, legally sanctioned terms while at the same time trying to reject state definitions and limitations on what "adivasi" politics ought to look like. Legally-determined adivasi politics still heavily dominated in the 1980s when public debate was centered almost exclusively on the revision and implementation of the "Kerala Scheduled Tribes (Restriction of Transfer and Restoration of Alienated Land) Act"of 1975 meant to restore "alienated land" to "tribals", who themselves were hardly involved in the

debate. It was, as Sreekumar and Parayil (2006: 232) put it, a "juridico-legal battle against political society[40]" by (non-adivasi) "civil society" actors, convinced that all over India "the root cause of all human right violations perpetuated on [tribals] can be traced to land alienation, since the tribals depend on land for their identity, existence, security and livelihood" (in Puthucherril and Vijayabalan 2001: 1). In Wayanad, the district with the highest concentration of "Scheduled Tribes" in Kerala where the AGMS emerged, land relations however are historically far more complex than the simple notion of "tribal land alienation" suggests.

"Land alienation", as put forward in the juridico-legal battles preceding the rise of the AGMS, is assumed to have happened recently and to all tribal (ST) communities in Wayanad. In fact, however, already in the late fourteenth and fifteenth century, regional *rajas* placed most of the agricultural and forest land in Wayanad under the control of Nair *jenmis* (landlords) and temple authorities, though some land continued to be cultivated by certain local communities such as the Kurichiyas and the Mullu Kurumas (both now STs) on communally held land (Kjosavik and Shanmugaratnam 2007). With the 1972 conquest of Malabar (of which Wayanad is part) by the British and the 1805 defeat of Pazhassi Raja, the insurgent overlord of Wayanad, the area became part of the British Madras Presidency. During the subsequent British revenue settlement that was completed in 1816, the overlordship of the landed aristocracy was acknowledged in order to create an agrarian class loyal to the British and to facilitate the establishment of British tea and cardamon plantations. Full proprietary rights were given to the *jenmis,* effectively establishing them as "the sole legal proprietors of all land in Malabar" (Panikkar 1978). In so doing, the customary rights of other claimants to the land, notably the "high-caste" Mullu Kurumar and Kurichiyar who had been engaged in paddy cultivation on communally held land, were again ignored (Joseph 1986: 43). Informally, however, many of the traditional use rights agreements continued. Since under the British revenue settlement uncultivated land was exempted from taxation,slave-owning *jenmis* had less incentive to organize production on their land. Hence a number of former slaves – mostly Paniyas and Adiyas – started to work on the plantations instead (Kunhaman 1985).[41] Meanwhile, uncultivated forest land, which formed the livelihood basis of a small minority of adivasis such as the Kattunaikans, was divided by the British into "private forest land" - mostly land historically given as royal endowments (*devaswon*) to temple authorities – and "revenue land" – mostly the former lands of the insurgent Pazhassi Raja. In fact the 1957 first Communist

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[40] By "political society" they do not mean a reference to Chatterjee but rather refer simply to political parties.

[41] The British planters' lobby, together with Christian missionaries, encouraged this shift by legally abolishing slavery in 1833 (Kooiman 1989).

Government of Kerala made an attempt to pass the Kerala Private Forest Act that would have provided for the redistribution of *devaswon* land to landless people but the act never passed the Legislative Assembly (Kjosavik Shanmugaratnam 2005: 1247).

Many local communities in Wayanad were hence already landless or dispossessed of traditional land usage claims when the first wave of settler migration came in the 1920s, led by relatively prosperous Syrian Christian farmers in search of new commercial opportunities (Baak 1997). This was followed by the main "colonization" thrust from 1940 to 1970 – a time when also poor subsistence farmers joined the migration wave (Joseph 1986: 124). An oft-repeated refrain today is that the Communist-led Kerala Land Reform Act of 1963, which gave tenant farmers ownership over land, worked out perversely for tribals because through it, the settlers whom had taken over their land in this period were able to claim the status of tenant vis-à-vis the tribal landowner and acquire title to the land of the tribals (see e.g. Cheria et al. 1997). In fact, however, the status of land customarily used by certain adivasi households in Kerala had until the land tribunals of the 1970s never been established as one of "full ownership". It was not the legal design of the land reforms as such but the local organizational strength of settlers, combined with bureaucratic indifference and casteism, that turned certain informal lease agreements between such adivasis and settlers in favor of the latter and that even led to the eviction of some adivasis from the land they had been using as the Act would have provided them with the ownership titles (*pattayam)* for the land under their occupancy. The legal struggles that ensued did not mean much to the largest and most proletarianized "tribe" in Kerala, the Paniya, who – with a few exceptions – never occupied land to be "alienated" from in the first place.

The Paniya and similar proletarian groups such as the Adiya, the "tribe" to which CK Janu (the AGMS's leader) belongs, generally, however, appeal less to civil society activists than do the more established and recognizably "tribal" landed groups such as the Kurichias[42], reputed to be experts in wielding the bow and arrow. While the more proletarianized group later came to form the forefront of the AGMS, the landed (or in some cases ex-landed) adivasi groups stood to benefit most from the juridico-legal battle over "alienated land". In 1986 the necessary regulatory framework to implement the Tribal Land (Restriction of Transfer and Restoration of Alienated Land) Act had been finalized but implementation was not forthcoming. At this, dr. Nalla Thampy Thera, a social activist and public interest litigator, famously petitioned the Kerala High Court demanding a speedy implementation of the act. In reaction, the court

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[42] Not surprisingly, the first "tribal" minster in Kerala, P K Jayalakshmi, elected in 2011, is a Kurichia (and an "archery star" as the *Deccan Herald* of May 21st 2011 reported).

eventually, in 1993, ordered precisely such implementation. Yet this in turn provoked a scuttling of the act as opponents of the law tried to pass an ordinance that would legalize all transactions of adivasi land up to 1986. When the "adivasi struggle" is retold, these legal "battles" are often included in its trajectory (e.g. Krishnakumar 2001). Enthusiasm for such legal struggles became all the more pronounced, moreover, around 2006 when the "Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Bill" was passed, again seen as crucial to adivasis' existence in Kerala even though proletarian groups like the Paniya have little connection to the forest and little to gain from the bill. Inevitably the juridico-legal agenda and the indigenist movement often clashed, notably in 2001 when Nalla Thampy Thera (and others) publicly criticized C K Janu for what Thera called her "diverting public attention from the main issue concerning tribals, that is, restoration of their alienated land" (*The Hindu*, October 20, 2001).

The indigenist break with the preceding "tribal" politics that was led by non-tribal activists and generally favored the less proletarianized tribal communities came with the increasing militancy in the course of the 1990s of people who themselves claimed an "adivasi" identity. They were supported by local NGOs such as Solidartiy and Hilda but also influenced by national level activists such as B. D. Sharma (former national Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes), Ram Dayal Munda (former vice-chancellor of Ranchi University in Jharkhand), and of course Krishna Iyer, a well-known progressive Malayalee High Court Judge in Delhi, who all came to Kerala in this period to offer their views on the "adivasi question". Initially it was not clear to what extent activists would be able to put to political use what initially was a heavily scripted language again harking back to ethnographic tribal stereotypes. The 1992 Coming Together or "Sangamam" organized by what came to be known as the "South Zone Adivasi Forum" was a key transitional moment. The initiative still lay primarily with non-adivasi social workers and NGOs[43], yet in the course of organizing the Sangamam, adivasi activists started to take an active role.

The idea for this particular Sangamam seems to have arisen during a state-level convention in January 1992 (Cheria et al. 1997: 66). Early that year, C K Janu and several other activists had visited adivasi organizations in Jharkhand and attended a national adivasi conference in Pune (Maharashtra). Back in Wayanad, after local consultations, C K Janu and others then took the

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[43] In the late 80s, big international donors like Oxfam that were active in South India embraced the "sangam" model, hoping that the funding of small community-based organizations would foster a "people's movement" to claim rights from the government, which might ultimately dissolve the dependence of these organizations on outside funding. The 1992 Sangamam was envisioned as a coming together of many such small community organizations.

decision to take October 12, 1992, as the day to organize the first large meeting of adivasis from different states and "tribes" (or *jatis*) of southern India. The day was highly symbolic as indigenous people all over the world were preparing protests to mark the 500th anniversary of Columbus' "discovery" of the Americas and the oppression of its indigenous peoples. To claim part of this "500 years of indigenous resistance", adivasi activists in Northern India had already decided to join in these protests. By June 1992, activists in southern India had decided to organize their own "celebration" as well.Columbus day was integrated into local adivasi history by tying it to the heroic struggle by "the adivasis of Wayanad led by Thalakkal Chandu" (a Kurichiya warrior) who "on this very day 190 years ago... beat back the British imperialist force destroying Panamaram Fort, 16 km from Mananthavady" (Bijoy 1993: 1357). The international discourse of indigenous people's leading role in the anti-imperialist struggle was hence made to resonate with the history of South India. A link was made to the international indigenist struggle, though to do so activists still needed to rely on imagery of the "upper-caste" Kurichiya adivasi community. At the Sangamam itself, however, Kurichiyas no longer formed a majority. Instead, it were mostly the most proletarian adivasis, whom NGOs opting for "the poorest of the poor" had been working with, who gathered there.

According to non-adivasi intellectuals who supported the Sangamam and reported on it, the adivasis gathering at Mananthavady aimed to finda "renewed vigor to strengthen their struggles against decimation as a distinct people" (Cheria et. al. 1997: 1). The meeting hence is represented as concerning "the reclamation of their [adivasi] identity, land, history and culture", "pride as a people" and refusal "to be subsumed and decultured" (Cheria et al. 1997: 66) and described as "the confluence of aspirations and articulations of the adivasis of this land to survive as a distinct people with an ecological worldview and culture" (1997: 69). Paniya and Adiya activists who later carried the struggle on, however, generally spoke to me of the Sangamam as marking the beginning of their struggle for land – not for "ancestral land" but for land to own and cultivate. Mananthavady, they told me, was the place to receive "trainings" in preparation of the land occupations that followed. With NGO support, the Sangamam also included a lot of other events such as presentations by scholars from the region on "adivasi life", photo-exhibitions, an exhibition-cum-sale of "adivasi art", "cultural performances", including of K J Baby's famous adivasi play *Nadugadhika*, and finally a "cultural procession" from the venue of the meeting through the town of Mananthavady, thought to be "an expression to assert the cultural identity of adivasis" (Cheria et al. 1997: 79). Whereas the Paniya and Adiya activists I spoke to mentioned the Sangamam as a time when they were only just starting to find their voice, the NGO workers involved were eager to emphasize that the event was organized "exclusively by adivasis" (ibid.) – a notion that was widely circulated in the media.

Though the Sangamam, in most Paniya and Adiya activists' retelling, functioned more as a "meeting place" from which only later the political program of land occupations grew, the claim by NGOs supporting the event that it was an expression of adivasi "self-assertion" became target for a storm of criticism from political opponents. The *Mathrubumi*, one of the largest newspapers in Kerala, gave a lot of attention to the views aired in protest meetings and marches by the BJP, according to whom the "real intentions" of the meeting ought to be investigated by the government because in fact its aims were to promote "anti-nationalism". The BJP moreover alleged the event did not enjoy the participation of the major adivasi organizations since it had been organized by "Christian missionaries" intent on "converting" adivasis. The *Deshabimani*, the official daily of the CPI(M), on the other hand largely repeated – without reference - the allegations of one of the CPI(ML) factions that the Sangamam was not organized by adivasis but with "foreign money" to serve the interests of feudalism and imperialism and subvert the growing people's struggle against the World Bank and the IMF.[44]From the beginning, it seems, political rivals were eager to re-frame the movement as precisely *not*representing an "adivasi voice" but rather a "Christian" or "foreign" one. The attack on the "authenticity" of claim to representing "adivasis" would increasingly pose a problem for the movement, certainly as the more subaltern and political interpretations of indigenism started to develop and bring the movement further away from stereotypical images of "adivasiness".

3.1.2 ATTEMPTS AT "AUTONOMOUS" ORGANIZING

The Sangamam of 1992 was followed by a number of actions publicly proclaiming the emergence of a new, autonomous "adivasi consciousness" under the leadership of the South Zone Adivasi Forum (SZAF) that, according to the NGO workers who had been active in its emergence, resolved to focus on the issues of "Land, Forest and Culture" (Cheria et. al. 1997). The year 1993 had been internationally proclaimed the "Year of the Indigenous Peoples" and SZAF leaders visited many places in India – from the Narmada Valley to Jharkhand – to build stronger national links and partake in the preparations for the celebration, under a reorganized Indian Council of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples, of the Indigenous People's Year in Delhi. Another South Indian Sangamam was also held, this time at Kodagu in Karnataka. Though attended by even more prominent national organizations and activists, such as the Asia

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[44] A small extreme Left organization calling itself Yuvajana Vedi even staged something I was to experience personally a decade later (see the Appendix to this dissertation): they *gheraoed* (encircled) a German tourist who happened to be in the area and hung a placard around his neck with the words "Imperialist spy" (Cheria et. al. 1997: 82).

Indigenous People's Pact, the UN International Working Group on Indigenous Affairs, and Medha Patkar of the Narmada Bachao Andolan, there seems to have been less participation of adivasis from Kerala. Interpreted as a failure by the organizers, it could well in fact have signaled how the more militant adivasi activists in Kerala were not interested in any more symbolic gatherings and rather were getting ready to confront the Kerala government, particularly over the issue of land distribution. Though the second Sangamam was framed primarily as part of an ongoing "unification" of tribes – a discourse that the SZAF would continue proclaiming in the media – under the surface a differentiation of political interests was taking place whereby landless "adivasi" communities increasingly refused to accept that more educated and landed adivasi – and non-adivasi activists -- would set the agenda (Cheria et al. 1997: 105ff).

With the renewed attention to "tribal" issues, the Kerala government meanwhile started to do its best to appear actively engaged with adivasis, if on its own terms. It started launching one after the other "welfare scheme" for tribal communities and in July 1993, declared Kerala a "total tribal literate State" (The Hindu, 4 July 1993). The media continued its coverage of the "misery" and "deprivation" facing tribals: "most Chippankuzhy tribals are anemic" (The Hindu, 4 August 1991) "misery of Suganthagiri adivasis is unparalleled" (Indian Express, 19 October 1991), "school [[attended by "tribal" children] sans teacher for 21 years" (The Hindu, 19 March 1992), "tribals ..hounded by fear" (Indian Express, 2 September 1992). Around 1994, however, headlines of "misery" and "fear" amongst tribals in Kerala became remarkably less numerous than those reporting on tribals "seething with anger" or engaging in a "stir for rights", "encroachment", "fast", "vote", or "take-over of forest land". Indicative of this turn was the launching on January 26, 1994, of the Adivasi Samyuktha Samara Samithy, a new front organization in Wayanad intent to secure land for landless adivasis. The lack of implementation of the Land Restoration Act was again publicized as the context of the Samithy's emergence though journalists I spoke to were actually upset that from the beginning "Janu and the Gothra Mahasabha were not giving much importance to the law. In fact they are neglecting their law" (interview, 23 August 2006).Against the visions of the NGOs and civil society activists – amongst whom many journalists – who had been pushing for a so-called "autonomous" adivasi movement they imagined would "reclaim the adivasi lands" legally due to adivasis, as the initiative of the movement moved to Paniya and Adiya activists, they were leaving the confines of the existing legal frameworks and focusing directly on acquiring land.

Though led now by Paniya and Adiya activists to whom the ST Land Act as it stood was of little use because it focused more on "alienated land" than on the needs of those who had for generations been landless, the media representation of their demands continued to focus on the

Act. In Cheria et. al (1997), who present the various times adivasi activists gathered at the collectorate at Kalpetta (the capital of Wayanad) as focusing on "the demand to implement the Scheduled Tribe Land Act", we can also read that these agitations were in fact dominated by landless adivasi workers angry about the fact that the government apparently could easily find land for commercial enterprises and systematically closed its eyes to the encroachment by settler families on government or forest land, yet could find no land to offer landless adivasis.

At the beginning of April 1994, out of the SZAF, the Adivasi Vikasana Pravarthaka Samithy (Organization for Tribal Development Workers) emerged, again led by C K Janu. The move to form a union of "tribal development workers" seemed modeled on the dalit struggle where organizations of SC civil servants (such as Kanchi Ram's BAMCEF) played a key role -- tribal development workers, amongst whom C K Janu herself, were the only significant group of (low-ranking) civil servants amongst the Paniya and Adiya. In April 1994, this Samithi, led a group of 200 adivasi families in a march to Ambukuthy, in the vicinity of Mananthavady, to claim a piece of about 60 acres of vested forest land - the other 60 acres of which had already been encroached by about 120 migrant families. Forest officials and police soon intervened and launched a violent attack on the attempted settlement. In protest, C K Janu started a hunger strike which she only quit after the assistant collector came to her hospital bedside to persuade her. Knowing well that promises by the collector were not enough to ensure them land, the mobilization however continued until the land titles were given.

In August 1994 C K Janu visited Geneva to take part in a meeting of the UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations.In November that same year, she went on to made it to the headlines in Kerala by rejecting a 10.000 rupees State Award for "best adivasi social worker" by the Kerala government. Rather than obey the label and thank the government for acknowledging her support tobring about "adivasi development", C K Janu, whom newspapers now claimed to be representing the "Adivasi Development Action Council" (*The Hindu*, 16 November 1994) announced she would only accept the award if the Minister for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes would respond to a number of issues of concern to adivasis, first and foremost the need for landless adivasis to be given land as well as the implementation of the Land Restoration Act, the enforcement of the SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act, and DNA tests to determine the paternity of out-of-wedlock children of adivasi mothers (ibid.). At the award ceremony, the organizers tried to skip over Janu's demands, to which she promptly reacted by returning the money and stating that if the governmentreally wanted to pretend to honor her, it ought to honor her work.

The act of returning the award was immediately taken up by the media and became a crucial moment in the emergence of the indigenist movement. It signaled the growing militancy and confidence of the movement's leadership and the state's failure to coopt it. C K Janu's gesture moreover went against any stereotype of adivasis as "innocent" and not daring to – or even capable of – politicizing media attention. C K Janu confronted the Kerala public with the claim that it was the state's own discrimination of adivasis and the lack of respect for their demands that was the problem. And this in turn caught the attention of dalit groups. Janu's anti-paternalist, proud gesture fit well with their political attitude and she immediately received the support of various dalit organizations at colleges in Thiruvanathapuram. The Dalit Panthers in Wayanad came forward to offer her an alternative award and from then on actively supported the land occupations C K Janu organized. Many dalit groups, such as the Dravida United Front and the Kerala Harijan Samaham, also supported the "Panavalli struggle", another land occupation that was commenced in March 1995 and through which also C K Janu herself for the first time in her life managed to acquire a plot of land.

By the time of the UN's proclamation of the "Decade of Indigenous People" in 1995, the beginnings were in place of a program that attracted support through claims to "adivasi" history yet in many ways departed from traditional tribal politics. The subsequent first half of the Indigenous Decade in Kerala was filled mostly with a combination of land occupations, still usually framed around– though not always actually in line with - the Scheduled Tribe Restoration of Alienated Land Act. National and international networking occurred less and there was instead an increase in local direct action. Further allegations by opponents of the movement that it was "foreign-funded" – and hence not "truly adivasi" -- came to a climax when C K Janu dared Revenue Minister K E Ismail to prove his allegations that she and her fellow activists were foreign funded or face legal action ("Janu dares Minister to prove allegations", *India Express*, 23 October 1996). The minister, apparently, had received a fax summing up the demands of what was now the Adivasi Ekopanan Samithi and had from this, according to Janu, concluded that she must be funded by "outsiders" since "no true tribal can afford fax expenses" (ibid.)[45].

Increasingly under attack and scrutinized on the question of "authenticity", adivasi activists in the second half of the 1990s temporarily returned to an explicit embrace of the legal discourse

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[45] Quoted in the *Indian Express* of 6 October 1996, Ismail said: "Who is this Janu to claim to speak for tribals? Do you know she has even been faxing representations to me almost every other day? How many real tribals can afford to fax letters? So is it not clear that she is supported by well-funded outsiders?". He then went on to allege that the Palakkad hostage drama had nothing to do with tribal activism: "The four people involved were not tribals but cheap criminals".

of "ancestral land". In October 1996 agitations against pro-settler amendments that were made by the CPI(M)-led government to the ST Land Act came to a heed with a hunger strike by the leader of the Dalit Liberation Front and a march on the secretariat by a group called the Adivasi Samrakshana Vedi. It was not so much defense of the Act but the desire to make a point of the perceived bias within the CPI(M) against adivasis and dalits that animated these strikes. That same year, an outfit calling itself the Ayyankali pada – after Kerala's most important dalit leader –took the collector of Palakkad district W R Reddy hostage for nine hours in order to demand the withdrawal of the amendment. Uproar followed the "hostage-taking" and C K Janu felt pressured to publicly condemn the incident and paint the hostage takers as clearly not adivasi considering their "violent" behavior ("'Hostage drama didn't help tribal cause'", *Indian Express* 13 October 1996). Early August 1997, the Adivasi Ekopana Samithi, in the words of one of its chairmen K M Salimkumar, decided to observe August 15th not as Independence Day but as "Betrayal Day", again primarily – it was reported – in protest against the amendment (*Indian Express*, August 4 1997). In 1998, finally, after many doubts had been voiced by the Central Government as well as by national Scheduled Tribes and human rights institutions, the President of India, who at the time was K R Narayanan (claimed as the first Dalit president of India and a Malayalee himself), decided not to give the amendment bill its necessary assent ("Tribals jubilant over President's decision", *The Hindu* 19 March 1998).

3.1.3   *FROM KURICHY TO KUNDALLA: VISIONS OF A DALIT-ADIVASI STRUGGLE*

By 2000, halfway through the UN Decade of the World's Indigenous Peoples, the movement led by C K Janu could be seen to depart more resolutely from the dominant script of the ST Land Act, articulating an agenda that was more broad-based and transformative than the legal confines of Act would allow. The year 2000 was a decisive moment as C K Janu joined a struggle at the dalit colony of Sachivothamapuram near the village of Kurichy. The colony was one of the first so-called "Harijan Colonies", set up in the context of caste reform movements in 1938 to provide erstwhile bonded laborers with a place for themselves, independent of their landlords (den Uyl 1994: 124). The colony had a vibrant Dalit activist engagement, particularly through the Dalit Women's Society (which also included men) that was founded there in 1992. The struggle at Kurichy is often left out of the retelling of the trajectory of the indigenist movement but has been claimed by activists themselves as a key moment. At a commemoration of the Kurichy struggle four years later, activists also commemorated the AGMS' strike in Thiruvanathapuram and the Muthanga struggle that followed vowing to "rededicate themselves to the struggle that Sreedharan started" (*The Hindu* February 9, 2004). Sreedharan was the

person who committed suicide during the Kurichy struggle, and whose memorial altar as a "dalit martyr" C K Janu unveiled that day.

From interviews with people at Kurichy, I learned that the main issue of the struggle had been a high-voltage electricity line that a private developer had been planning to erect over the colony, with permission of panchayat members who had allowed themselves to be bribed. The developer had planned the short-cut in order to save money on material so that more of the allotted money could end up in his own pockets. For this purpose, however, a dangerous high-voltage electricity line would be drawn over the colony (which itself had only a very unreliable power supply) and trees would have to be cut. Even some houses would have to be partly demolished. As Krishnamma, the daughter-in-law of Sreedharan, told me:

> "it was obvious to us that this kind of trick would only be pulled on a dalit colony".

People understood that those scheming to erect the electricity line were assuming dalits lacked the "awareness" to stop it. As Krishnamma said:

> "Those planning the scheme could not get it into their mind of course that one of our relatives was an engineer working at the Kerala Electricity Board and was able to inform us of all the technical details."

One of the first things people at the colony did was send a memorandum to the minister calling on him to intervene, followed by a petition to the court. Meanwhile, however, the developer was continuing his efforts to draw the line over the colony and so the inhabitants decided direct action was necessary. One day, when most men were out, electricity workers came to erect the electricity poles. As Krishnamma described:

> "We went to the junction and each of us put ourselves in the pits that were made to erect the electric posts. In fact it is women who took the initiative to get things done here."

Emphasizing their "awareness", Krishnamma continues:

> "We stood united as we were convinced about the pros and cons and the consequences."

After several attempts, however, the electricity workers eventually did succeed in erecting the posts. At this, one of the dalit engineers from the colony, in front of a crowd of police, climbed into one of the poles and cut the line, proudly proclaiming "I am doing democracy". Again, however, the line was reconnected. At that point, inhabitants decided to start a hunger strike.

As Krishnamma told me:

> "My husband was the first person who took the initiative for the hunger strike. He had been striking for five days… His health was getting worse: we wanted the police to arrest him and take him to the hospital."

This, she explained, was usual practice yet when it came to Dalits, the police was apparently not concerned with the risk of a hunger striker dying.Therefore, she said,

> "Around five o'clock we planned to besiege the panchayat [municipal] office. Soon all of us assembled there and rushed to surround the office. We took the panchayat officials hostage. All of a sudden, the district collector and superintend of police came to the spot and called us for discussion in a nearby house. After the discussion they agreed to arrest my husband and moved him to the hospital."

As her husband was taken to the hospital, another person took over and continued the hunger strike until the electricity board had assured them they would drop the plan.

A few days later, inhabitants of the colony were however told the Supreme Court had ordered that the electricity line plan was to continue. Again a group of police and officials came to charge the line and again most men of the colony were at work. Krishnamma said her reaction was to grab a can of kerosene and rush out:

> "Without a moment of though, I snatched one of the kids and carrying a can of kerosene I stood still in front of them. And I shouted at them, 'Only stepping over my dead body will you be able to get the line charged.' Then for that day they stopped working and dispersed."

The climax of the struggle, however, came the next day:

> "When the officials turned up, my husband went up to the terrace holding one of Ayyankali's [the historical Pulaya leader] photographs. He had dipped himself in kerosene and with a light in his hand he was standing on the terrace while we were quarrelling with the police. The Superintendent of Police Vinod Kumar saw Jayan [Krishnamma's husband] standing there and ordered the policemen to snatch him. By the time they were close to Jayan they tried to beat him with a latti [bamboo stick]. Then somebody pushed me and I raised myself up and snatched the latti. With that latti, I remember beating somebody. Then a crowd of women police rushed toward me. The atmosphere worsened and seven of us women were dragged into the police jeep. Then someone shouted 'Brothers, our sisters are being arrested!'".

The added gender dimension to the humiliation the protesters were experiencing escalated the scenario. As Krishnamma went on to tell:

> "Our father [Krishnamma's father in law] heard this [that the women were being arrested] and came running and shouting. All the colony people were there. ... Dad was collecting stones and made a circle with them and filled it with dry leaves. Then he poured kerosene onto it.... He was demanding our release and was asking them to stop the work. The SP [Superintendent of Police] shouted 'We are not going to stop the work. Go to hell.' Then he [father in law] screamed, 'I will die.'"

Emphasizing her knowledge of constitutional rights and their neglect when it comes to Dalits, Krishnamma continues:

> "The police had to get him arrested in order to rescue him. Either they had to arrest him or had to seek the help of the fire brigade -- as per the law. But nobody cared about father's voice. Everyone was trying to force Jayan down from the terrace. With a ladder some policemen tried to catch him. But he threatened to commit suicide if the police

touched him. Meanwhile dad poured kerosene all over his body, then fired the pile of dry leaves and jumped into the fire..."

Many activists emphasized that these events at Kurichy were crucial to the dalit-adivasi struggle in Kerala. Sunny Kappikade, one of the leading dalit activists in the area, came to the colony as soon as he heard of the struggle going on:

"It was a turning point. As a person I felt one thing at the time: if this action [struggle] is a failure, if it ends in a big *latti* charge [police beating] ....what can I do then...I will commit suicide...I was the working committee chairman ....and that was my decision...we have no other option, we will commit suicide...not just me, Geethanandan [to be leader of the AGMS] also – as a person I felt it and I'd do it. Otherwise we cannot live in Kerala. I felt it, I have no other option then, not only I but all leaders....so many persons would commit suicide. We cannot go anywhere else in Kerala, if this action failed."

Afraid the struggle might produce more martyrs and worried it would affect their electoral chances, the CPI(M) government eventually intervened to ensure the high-powered line did not cross the colony. This victory thereby became a significant turning point. As Sunny Kappikade told me:

"it was a breakthrough in the movement. After that we started the adivasi actions – upto Muthanga. This same team went to Wayanad with Janu, destroyed that engineering college in Kundalla."

The Kundalla struggle was the next major struggle of the indigenist movement– according to newspapers that ignored the Kurichy colony episode as part of the struggle, "the first direct action after the 'Pallakad collector hostage drama'" (*The Hindu*, September 3, 2001). The struggle emerged in the context of the stagnation of the pace and scope of success in claiming land for landless adivasis in the early 2000sand the reluctance of the government and existing political parties to acknowledge the emerging indigenist movement. Therefore, when C K Janu and Geethanandan, who had also been active at Kurichy, heard about a conflict developing between a local adivasi community and the government at Kundalla, they decided to lend their support and signal the emergence of a state-wide indigenist platform. They interpreted the conflict at Kundalla as a typical case of "development" taking place at the cost of adivasi livelihood. The issue, as indigenist leaders framed it, was that the government had decided to erect a Government Engineering College on land of Kundula's Muduvan community – a relatively isolated ST community about an hour from the nearest town. This was forcing the Muduvan community to be evicted from the land – a classic case of adivasi dispossession. I was told that initially the engineering college had been planned on land taken from the large Tata Tea plantation in the area (see also Mukundan 2001). But the government backed off at the last moment from claiming a piece of land from Tata and instead preferred to dispossess adivasis for a college they themselves would never be able to attend. The government, meanwhile, was

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defending the project for following an affirmative action policy of erecting prestigious government colleges in areas of relative under-development.Interestingly, when I visited the Kundalla Muduvan community and talked to Martin, the leading activist from the community itself, I realized that "adivasi dispossession" and the "adivasi struggle for land" were only one of many possible ways in which the struggle could have been framed.

I was surprised that the first, second and last thing Martin and others from the community told me was about the practice of this Muduvan community that menstruating women would retreat into a special hut in the forest for the duration of their period. I did not quite understand at first how this was of relevance to the political struggle and was almost assuming they must be telling me this so emphatically because they were assuming that as an "anthropologist" this was the kind of information I would be interested in. Martin showed me around the area where people (who turned out to be from an SC community in Tamil Nadu) were working the community's considerable land holdings and where the landscape was dotted with huts beside mostly empty concrete houses (with the odd cow inside). The empty houses were the outcome of a Swiss-funded (and obviously not entirely successful) development project. The community had moreover – somewhat more successfully – been the target of Indira Gandhi's twenty-point program, which from 1979 had invested 7 million rupees in setting up a cattle farm there. I was told the farm had run until 1996, when government funding was stopped. People were still tending the cows and having them graze on the mountain but the farm building itself lay abandoned. And so it was precisely this structure that was to be turned into a Government College.

Looking at the relatively small building on the large area of land, I started wondering ifits construction would mean the Muduvan community would need to be evicted from the land. This is when it was made clear to me why Martin and others had been so emphatic about the traditional rites of Muduvan women: the problem for the local community was that with the engineering college, young men would come to the area, which was something the community leaders wanted to avoid at all cost. As Martin exclaimed:

> "If some outsiders come here is it possible for us to live like this? Would it be possible for us to mingle with them? *It would not be possible*. If it's settlers, it is easy for them to adapt. If there were some educated people .. it would be easy for them …but here the adivasi way of living and practices are entirely different. We are to do certain things all-alone."

Once interpreted as an issue of adivasi land dispossession, the struggle itself further confirmed this frame. Seeing that the construction of the college was continuing, the activists, as at Kurichy, decided to "take matters into our own hands". On March the 24th, they organized a big adivasi "cultural event" and that same evening they demolished the part of the college that had

already been erected, clashing with outsiders – including CPI(M) affiliated *goondas* -- who had been mobilized to defend the structure and attack the activists. Many activists got badly injured and there were again many arrests. Three days later, opponents came back to attack the Muduvan community itself and the Muduvans fled into the forest, having to leave behind an old man unable to walk, who subsequently died from neglect. This, in turn lead to headlines of a "tribal death due to starvation" (Mukundan 2001), further highlighting the land-starved condition of adivasis (though the Muduvans in question were relatively well-off).

After several further actions, including *hartals* in different parts of Idukki and Kottayam districts, C K Janu started a public hunger strike on April 28. She made a number of demands, first and foremost of which that the government "restore tribal lands to its tribal owners and rehabilitate all the landless tribals" (Mukundan 2001). Inaugurating the hunger strike, the chairman of the Confederation of Human Rights Organizations of Kerala fiercely condemned the "anti-tribal attacks". A former Member of the Legislative Assembly, ignoring the fact that Muduvans had not just struggled "against development" but had in fact also criticized how development funds for their cattle farm had been withdrawn, claimed that "the education Minister Joseph has tried to impose development upon the chest of Adivasis, which they do not want". Another speaker then urged the government to take the hunger strike more serious since Janu was "not only a known Dalit leader of Kerala, but also a woman" (ibid.). Under pressure, the government eventually decided to set up a commission to investigate the issue, which indeed put an end to the plans to erect a Government College at the Kundalla Munduvan colony. According to Martin, the commission had respected adivasis' "isolated way of life". The indigenist activists spearheading the struggle meanwhile claimed it as another key victory both in terms of the adivasi land struggle and their struggle for dignity and respect.

3.1.4 *THE MUTHANGA STRUGGLE: WITHIN AND AGAINST THE "ADIVASI" FRAME*

Whereas Kurichy had helped strengthen the movement internally by allowing for a broader ideological interpretation of the "adivasi" struggle and confirming adivasi ties to dalit networks, Kundalla had been a success particularly in allowing for local conflicts to be interpreted as part of a wider social pattern that C K Janu's movement was confronting. The movement seemed able to successfully play the "adivasi" card without being played by it. This set the stage for the next phase that started when in 2001, indigenist activists in Wayanad reported on a number of "starvation deaths" occurring in adivasi colonies. The authorities tried to argue that in fact drinking, neglect, or disease (especially TB and dysentery) had caused the various deaths. Yet activists rejected these argument and claimed it would make it all the more obvious that

structural solutions were necessary. Some announcements of "free rice for tribals" and medical camps (*The Hindu* July 12, 2001) were not going to make the desired impact. According to activists, the root problem was adivasi landlessness. In name of the "Adivasi-Dalit Samara Samithi" (Adivasi-Dalit Action Council) they announced a "restoration of rights march". Dalit activists who had participated in Kurichy and Kundalla travelled to Wayanad to help mobilize adivasis for what became the "Avakasa Sthapana Yatra" (Rights Assertion March). As the struggle gained more attention, it also increasingly however started to be framed as a classical "tribal" struggle – and not just by activists themselves.

Early September newspapers still mentioned the Adivasi-Dalit Action Council (e.g. *The Hindu*, 9 September 2001) but two weeks later, when on September 18th the "Adivasi Solidarity Day" was announced, many were leaving out the "Dalit" part of the organizations' name and were reporting instead on "The Adivasi Action Council". They did so even when reporting on the death of Kallara Biju, a dalit from Vaikom who is remembered as a "martyr" since he died from a heart attack while travelling with adivasi activists to Thiruvanathapuram, the end point of the "rights march" (*Indian Express*, 19 September 2001). In the capital, from 29 October onwards, activists organized what came to be known as the *kudil ketti samaram,* a "relief camp" strike, erecting "refugee huts" in front of the Chief Minister's official residence under a banner that read "Scheduled Tribes Solidarity Committee", demanding that poverty be alleviated, jobs provided, and the Adivasi Welfare Fund be put to its proper use. Most media attention however went to "the adivasi land issue", pushing "poverty" and "employment" demands to the background. Newspapers moreover commented that the "relief camp" strategy, a novel one according to them, was tolerated by the Chief Minister because he did not consider the "agitation of tribals as a 'political' one" (*Indian Express*, 3 September 2001).

As the aspirations of the organizers to form a new political block started to materialize at a state-wide level, the tensions in the indigenist discourse itself also increased. The most difficult issue to handle in the indigenist frame again was that of "alienated" land as envisioned under the 1975 ST Land Act: on the one hand, activists were pushed to claim back "ancestral" land for landless adivasis and to do so in light of the continuing legal battle around the act but on the other hand, those most active in the struggle had neither potential claims to land under that act, nor sentimental historical attachment to such land and preferred to simply receive any nearby land without any settler claims on it. After 48 days of camping out in front of the State Secretariat, the Chief Minister finally reached out to the movement and agreed on a settlement with C K Janu that promised that all landless adivasis in Kerala would receive one to five acres of cultivable land and that distribution of such land would start on the 1st of January 2002. Many commentators saw the fact that C K Janu dropped the emphasis on "ancestral land" a "climb

down" (Sreekumar and Parayil 2006: 244; K S Singh 2001), though AGMS activists considered the agreement a clear victory.

Activists in the AGMS did, however, remain doubtful as to the implementation of the agreement and pledged to undertake direct action if the promises turned out to be empty. In the meanwhile, in April 2002 another major struggle was inaugurated – again by C K Janu, who by now had become *the* adivasi leader of Kerala - against the pollution by a Coca-Cola plant at Plachimada in Palakkad District (see e.g. Aiyer 2007). Since a significant part of the affected population was adivasi and dalit, activist initially saw a potential of it becoming another episode in the adivasi land struggle. In a demonstrative march through the affected area on August 4, many of the activists who had earlier been part of the "refugee hut strike" participated. The overwhelming popularity in Kerala of a struggle targeting such a clear symbol of American and corporate imperialism as "Coca Cola", however, won out over the framing of the struggle as one more exclusively on behalf of adivasi-dalit land rights. It did remain a secondary theme, emphasized for instance in alliances between the anti-Coca-Cola struggle and adivasi organizations in India's mining belt. But since in the rest of Kerala it was not so much dispossession by multinational companies but rather a negligent government reluctant to distribute land to landless adivasis that was the main problem the AGMS was confronting, engagement of other than locally resident adivasis in the Plachimada struggle soon died out.

Instead, by the end of 2002 a momentum was building up of landless adivasis invading government plantations and other lands the government had tentatively earmarked for redistribution. On the 27th of October 2002, the AGMS organized a "surprise" action to claim parts of Aralam farm in Kannur district – a huge, 7000-acre cooperative farm of which half had been bought by the state government from the central government in order to be redistributed to adivasis but where legal battles over the actual implementation of this plan produced continuous delay. Yet, even with the pressure building up on the Kerala government to implement the promises of the 2001 agreement, the pace of government action was frustrating. The government was trying to delay redistribution by claiming it either could not find enough land or did not know the number of landless adivasi families. Sympathetic bureaucrats within the Tribal Resettlement and Development Mission (TRDM), the institution set up to honor the 2001 agreement, were hoping the AGMS would organize agitations in order to strengthen the mission's bargaining power vis-a-vis the government to push through its plans for land redistribution. The AGMS leadership decided, however, that the problem could only be confronted through action that would attract "higher-level", nation-wide attention and thereby help to increase the pressure on the Kerala government. They decided to claim land at the

Muthanga Wildlife Sanctuary, a depleted "nature" area[46]falling under Central Government legislature and hence likely to attract national attention.

The AGMS leadership also chose the area because they could claim it as an "adivasi homeland": shrines were found in the area that were believed to have belonged to adivasi ancestors. To the media, AGMS leaders described their journey to Muthanga as "a line of thousands of refugees going to their ancestral lands". They said,

> "those who returned to Muthanga conversed with the spirits of the mountains with ease, as though they got back their freedom that they lost centuries ago. They, the Paniya, the Adiya, the Bettakuruma, the Kaattunayaka, the Kurichia etc, belonging to all the tribes of Wayanad, woke up their gods in unison".

What the leaders left out of this discourse was, obviously, that almost none of the "adivasis" gathering at Muthanga actually lived there before and that they were claiming the land to build houses and cultivate their own plots. Some of the participants in the Muthanga occupation were in fact surprised to find out the targeted land was a wildlife sanctuary and worried about the wild animals that roamed the area. Yet, the image of adivasis returning to their homeland to live in harmony with nature inspired many civil society organizations and helped the AGMS gain support, which was desperately needed as soon after the AGMS settled at Muthanga, all political parties started mobilizing against the occupation.

The AGMS' public representation of the struggle however started to backfire as "facts" were circulated about the "real" nature of the occupation. The "Wayanad Environmental Protection Organization", an environmental group lead by local landowners in the area – some of whom used to graze their cattle there and were enraged by what they considered a manipulation of "innocent adivasis" by "outside" activists – came out with a "Spot Investigation Report". It was entitled "Invasion of Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary: Some Disturbing Truths" and "revealed" that:

> "[m]ost of those who occupy the makeshift tents inside the Sanctuary are from far away places … and most of them are having ration cards and houses in those areas"

the latter apparently disqualifying them from being "authentically" adivasi. The report moreover again complained that:

> "[t]he Agreement [of 2001] was a real selling of the adivasi cause when compared to adivasi struggles around the world … because nowhere in the world there is a demand for alternative land for alienated land…. In stead of the robbed land, the victim agrees to accept land 'somewhere'!"

Fears of police repression that adivasi communities living near the site of the land occupation had voicedwere twisted into proof that:

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[46] The area had formerly been occupied by a eucalyptus plantation supplying a paper factory owned by the Birlas, one of India's wealthiest business houses (Raman 2004: 129).

> "Ms C K Janu is not representing the real Adivasi cause now because she and her gang men threatened the local tribal people living in the periphery of the Sanctuary".

These arguments were soon taken up more widely by political opponent of the AGMS and provided the government with a reason to intervene. On February 19 2003, a large number of police officials were sent to evictthe occupation, escalating into brutal violence. One adivasi activist and one policeman died during the eviction and massive arrests followed. There were many incidents those days too of locals identifying random "adivasis" and hauling them to the police station for their supposed complicity in the Muthanga struggle. At that point, in reaction to the violence, most political parties and other opinion-makers turned to condemning the "atrocities on adivasis". *The Hindu* (16-17 June 2003) published a long, two-piece article by Supreme Court Judge V R Krishna Iyer lamenting the plight of

> "the artless, powerless adivasis, native to this habitat, ... terrorized by law out of their forest dwellings"[47].

To reconcile the organized resistance shown by AGMS activists during the eviction with the image of the "innocent adivasi" and to shift the blame for the escalation away from the police, stories started to circulate that the violence of the Muthanga eviction had been instigated by non-adivasi "outsiders": either the People's War Group (a Naxal contingent active in Andhra Pradesh) or the LTTE (the then Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka) hadmingled with the "innocent tribals". This sympathy for the "real" adivasis, however, did not prevent the government from filing court cases against the movement's participants that dragged on – and continued their intimidating and paralyzing effects -- for years after[48].

The Muthanga struggle clearly brought to the fore the "dark side" of the indigenist frame (Shah 2007) when applied to adivasi workers. Yet Muthanga cannot be simply regarded as a failure for the indigenist movement. Perhaps most significantly, it pushed established political parties to take the indigenist challenge seriously. Not able to simply repress the movement, political parties mobilized against it by in fact taking on board much of its program. The newly created "adivasi" wing of the CPI(M) for instance became particularly active in Wayanad after 2003 – something C K Janu and others see as a sign of the victory of the AGMS rather than of its defeat. The AGMS moreover –for better or worse – developed a political-party wing, the Rashtriya Maha Sabha ("Political Grand Council") in order to try and get at least some direct representation in the state parliament and sustain the pressure on existing political parties to

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[47] The article went on to – entirely out of context - lament how adivasis' "unlettered ways, their naiveté make them easy prey to exploitation by cunning settlers" and argue that "the tribal is part of bio-diversity and is its sentinel rather than its hostile," therefore requiring "a compassionate forest legislation restoring the traditional forest resources to the tribals".

[48] Early 2011, court cases against adivasi activists were still continuing.

either cater to adivasi needs or see these "vote banks" shift toward the Rashtriya Maha Sabha. Despite the experiences at Muthanga, in which hegemonic indigenist interpretations became obviously oppressive, many adivasis and dalits continued to believe in some form of indigenist "identity politics" and would not revert to framing their issues in the old language of "class". Having sketched the historical trajectory of the emergence of the AGMS ad its indigenist framing, I now look into some instances of how adivasiness became interpreted in Kerala in some more detail.

3.2 TRAVELLING MODELS, COMMON-SENSE, AND CONSCIENTIZATION

Though the AGMS became recognizable as new political force in Kerala thanks to the way it reframed a series of conflicts that otherwise may have been reduced to issues of "lack of development" or "the plight of agricultural laborers" as questions of adivasi discrimination and oppression, "adivasiness" itself is a complicated notion. In the second part of this chapter, I describe how between internationally circulating models of indigenism and local "common-sense" understandings, AGMS activists try to "conscientize" sympathizers towards a politically more useful understanding of what it is to be adivasi, meanwhile encountering the many tensions and dilemmas embedded in the concept.

3.2.1 *"TRAVELLING MODELS" OF INDIGENISM AND THEIR TENSIONS*

The main cause of the rise of indigenism around the world is often assumed, somewhat tautologically, to be the influence of the growing strength of the international indigenous people's movement (see e.g. Niezen 2003). The international influences on adivasi politics in Kerala are, however, largely indirect and reproduce the tensions and contradiction inhabiting adivasi politics in general. AGMS activists call upon discourses with clearly identifiable international origins mostly when there is a need to draw the attention of actors beyond Kerala, to appeal to a global civil society audience, or to introduce new ideas for which no established local discourse is available. Examples of direct international references include how exerpts from Chief Seattle's famous speech were read to celebrate World Indigene Day (The Hindu, August 11 2006)[49] or the proclaimed pride of indigenist activists in Kerala when Cathy Freeman

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[49] The newspaper article reporting on the reading also noted that Chief Seattle's speech had been taken from a Hollywood movie, which script was rather far removed from the original words of the chief.

(an aboriginal Australian) won a gold medal at the Olympics in 2000. Often these references remain similar to Communist references to "the land of Soviets where all are equal" or "the heroic strikes of red Chicago"[50]: they invoke an imaginary connection but remain abstract, afloat on top of local realities. Sometimes ideas that originate in national and international exchange however do become part of local indigenism so much so that without an awareness of the international scene, one could easily mistake them for unique, local expressions. The frequent usage of environmental metaphors and insistence on the leading role of adivasi women, for instance, I first took for typical qualities of C K Janu's leadership, until I discovered their strong resonance with the international indigenous movement.

The actual participation of AGMS leaders in international fora has been limited. In the mid-1990s C K Janu travelled to Geneva and Thailand on invitation of the UN Working Group for Indigenous Rights and moreover took part the Inter-continental Caravan for Solidarity and Resistance that toured Europe (see Madsen 2001) on invitation of Global People's Action, a direct-action centered alter-globalization network. Regional-level activists like C R Bijoy actively put AGMS activists in contact with national and international networks such as the National Front for Tribal Self-rule and the Indian Confederation of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples. Yet direct networking beyond Kerala remains limited. The Indian government continues to refuse to acknowledge any exclusive claims to "indigeneity", thereby hindering international cooperation buy international exchanges are all the more obstructed by the intense suspicion harbored in Kerala towards any "foreign" cooperation. Growing out of a combination of post-colonial and Cold War suspicion of foreign intervention[51] it is very difficult for any political grouping in Kerala to receive international support, let alone money[52], and not be buried locally under hostile suspicions. For me it was initially even quite difficult to meet C K Janu since she was worried that being seen with a white woman would re-open the storm of such criticism that had confronted her after her foreign trips in the 1990s.

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[50] Referring to the 1886 general strike in Chicago for the eight hour workday and its brutal police suppression – a day commemorated on International Workers' Day (the 1st of May).

[51] Such suspicion should not be considered paranoia. Note for instance that the American ambassador in India at the time of the first Communist government in Kerala in his memoirs explicitly tells of how American money was indeed involved in supporting the break-up of the first democratically elected Communist government in Kerala in 1959 (Moynihan 1975: 41).

[52] In order to receive money from foreign donors, an organization moreover needs official "FCRA" (Foreign Contributions Registration Act) status, which is a difficult and costly bureaucratic process – so much so that a distinct "market value" has become attached to NGOs with FCRA status. Being a social movement, the AGMS obviously does not have FCRA status though an NGO such as Solidarity, which used to be closely associated with the movement in its earliest phase, does.

Despite the relative weakness of international influences, some themes circulating in the international political landscape of indigenism do acquire some meaning locally, though they inevitably then also evoke certain dilemmas. The three international "travelling models" of indigenism that Anna Tsing (2007) distinguishes – the "sovereignty" model originating along a Canada-New Zealand axis, the "pluri-ethnic autonomy" model travelling through Latin America and the US, and the "environmental stewardship" model coming out of the Amazonian struggles – find their echoes in Kerala and evoke what Anna Tsing calls "nodes of tension". The environmental take on indigenism is sometimes reproduced by AGMS activists when they claim that adivasis are less alienated from nature and can lead the way for "modern" citizens to regain a healthier, more sustainable way of life. In the context of the erosion of Kerala's food sovereignty and the pollution of its natural environment, this take on indigenism helps the movement acquire allies. Tensions appear, however, when adivasis are cast as somehow more respectful of nature not because their livelihoods are closely related to it or because they want to resist commercial agriculture but simply for "being adivasi". C K Janu played into this discourse for instance when in a piece in *Indigenous Affairs*, the influential publication of the International Working Group on Indigenous Affairs, she described the relationship of adivasis to their environment in terms of the earth being their "mother" and the forest their "father". In fact such a discourse however sits rather uncomfortably with the mortal fear that the adivasi workers usually have of forest animals and especially wild elephants (see also Shah 2010; Baviskar 1997).[53] As we saw in the first part of this chapter, when AGMS leaders adjusted their language to dominant eco-indigenist imaginary, this gained them a large audience but also backfired terribly[54].

The indigenist theme of "sovereignty", likewise, serves AGMS activists in modeling their search for pride in adivasi "culture" and their efforts to unite adivasis into a political block. In this vein, the re-valuation ofthe historical roots of various adivasi *gothras* ("clans") to demonstrate adivasis' sophisticated civilizational achievements before their subjugation by the Aryans is quite popular amongst AGMS activists. The internationally dominant reading of indigenous sovereignty also, however, invokes many tensions. One is the fact that the interpretation given

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[53] Many adivasis I spoke to who had participated in the Muthanga struggle even considered elephants almost as direct messengers of the state: the story of how one elephants had stormed their settlement as if sent by the forest guards to destroy it was repeated to me many times. C K Janu eventually clarified that the elephant had in fact been possessed by alcohol – and diarrhea -- since it had stumbled upon a vat of illegal liquor brewed in the area and had drank it whole.

[54] A more logical ally might have been the international Via Campesina movement (see e.g. Borras, Edelman and Kay 2008) yet for reasons that would deserve in-depth research, this international movement's allies in India have not been peasants or agricultural workers – as in Latin America – but rather the more upper-caste farmers who are often their most direct oppressors.

to sovereignty by organizations in the US or even in the North-East of India (e.g. the National Front for Tribal Self-Rule) hardly fits the situation in Kerala where adivasis historically live much more intermingled and integrated with other communities. Importing a notion of autonomy that stresses territorial sovereignty raises the specter of secessionism, which in turn tends to invoke particularly brutal state suppression. A more internal problem is moreover that by organizing explicitly on a "clan" basis, though the aim is to valorize one's community, the fault-lines of community divides also tend to deepen. There is moreover the danger that the process leads to a Sanskritizing competition for status. As dr. Ambedkar warned in his *Annihilation of Caste*: "The literature of Hindus is full of caste genealogies in which an attempt is made to give a noble origin to one ['s own] caste and an ignoble origin to other castes", which according to him contributed to the general "anti-social spirit" of the caste system (Ambedkar in Rodriguez 2002: 269). Though in principle sovereignty does not imply cultural purity, open statements of such, moreover, only tend to be tolerated if communities can demonstrate a degree of cultural "authenticity" (see Sonntag 2005) and this places pressure on adivasi communities to start policing each other for such signs.

The "pluri-ethnic autonomy" model of deepening democracy that Tsing identifies as dominating in many parts of Latin America is perhaps the least problematic for adivasi activists in Kerala, though it has a somewhat different form there: unlike in Latin America, in India the issue for adivasis is not so much to reform the constitution – which is already one of the most progressive in the world – but rather to fight against the casteism that prevents the constitution, and with it dr. Ambedkar's legacy, from being implemented in practice. But even this model is not entirely unproblematic. As happens in Latin America in debates over the legal definition of who is to be considered "indigenous", so also in India legal categorizations sometimes come to overshadow commitments to a more democratic reading of indigenous identity – in India for instance reflected in the strict separation of "Scheduled Castes" and "Scheduled Tribes". Ironically the fact that the ideological guru of this form of indigenism in India -- dr. Ambedkar – was himself the person to draft the constitution tends to make these legal constructs all the more unquestionable. The category of the "adivasi" likewise often remains taken for granted and the critique of caste does not necessarilylead to less essentialist ideas about the realities reflected in it, as we can see in Ambedkar's own words in arguing against the "indifferentism" of the caste system that supposedly led to "the aborigines .. remain[ing] savages because they [the Hindus] had made no effort to civilize them, to give them medical aid, to reform them" (Ambedkar in Rodriguez 2002: 279).

Neither the few direct international contacts, nor the natural fit or ease of international "travelling models" of indigenism, hence give a convincing explanation of the rise of indigenism

in Kerala. As we will see next, however, also everyday, locally engrained interpretations of indigeneity – the "common sense" of what it means to be adivasi in Kerala – are full of ambiguity.

3.2.2 *"SOMETHING THE GOVERNMENT CALLS US"*

The "common sense" discourse amongst most educated Malayalees – including, ironically, many educated adivasis themselves – is that "there are 35 tribes in Kerala, all with distinct customs and traditions", that they "live in the forest", and are "innocent and hapless". As is usual of common sense, it seems to be immune to empirical refutation. The fact that the number "35" refers to the number of "Scheduled Tribes" in the government census and has changed over time as "corrections" are made and certain groups are removed from or added to the list somehow never upsets the idea that it is their "distinct customs and traditions" rather than the government that determines the tribality of these groups. The idea that they "live in the forest" is also stubborn enough to withstand any empirical test. Once I overheard an educated Malayalee acquaintance telling one of his friends how I was doing research on adivasis and was thus spending a lot of time "in the forest". I confronted him saying I was not going to the forest at all, simply to the edge of the village where many Christian farmers also lived. All I got in return, however, was a blank stare and then an outright negation – "yes, to the forest". Likewise, "innocent" and "hapless" (and another chain of synonyms including "artless", "naïve", "destitute", "poor" [*pavam*], and "child-like") seem definite markers of adivasiness since if ever a person normally considered "adivasi" would act differently this would not be part of her adivasi character but have been produced under the influence of forces external to herself – if not Naxals, or Tamil Tigers, then some even more foreign "outsider", or, alternatively, alcohol. The qualification that the person in question was not a "real adivasi" would usually follow.

When educated Malayalees other than my research assistants were around when I talked to adivasi workers, it was usually almost impossible for me to quiz the latter on what they understood as what it is to be "adivasi". Whenever they started telling me something that did not fit the "35 forest-dwelling innocent distinct communities" scheme, the more educated by-standers would usually feel the need to intervene and warn me that I was talking to the wrong people on this issue, that these uneducated adivasis obviously did not know what it meant to be "adivasi" – instead, I should talk to P R G Mathur or some other anthropologist or, if anything, consult these by-standers as they were at least educated. The adivasi worker in question would usually keep silent and later emphatically underline her supposed "ignorance", telling me things like "it's true *chechi* [elder sister], we don't know anything about these things.." or "we were

unaware of all thatin our mind, words, and deeds (*manasa vacha karman*)!". As the seemingly apologetic ending of many Paniya songs goes:

> "I have no learning; I have no intelligence (*budhi*). I do not know the regulations. I do not know the authority. Let not my words go wrong..." (Aiyyappan 1992: 98).

Sometimes, however, I got an uneducated adivasi worker to reveal a bit of the "hidden transcript" below the public disguise of ignorance and talk to me about her interpretation of what it meant to be "adivasi". A particularly interesting exchange I had was with Velli, a woman whom I often met in the Paniya colony where I did most of my fieldwork. Velli participated in the Muthanga struggle but not in a leadership role. She had not attended school, though she could read and write a little because of literacy campaigns in the area. She said she used to go for day labor in the paddy fields whenever she got the chance but for most of the time I knew her she did not work since she had a badly infected wound on her hand. The wound had started as a little accident while harvesting ginger but had become a major infection, even affecting her baby who was struggling with a bad skin rash. I often spoke with Velli about her ordeals – she knew well, she told me, that the ointment the doctor prescribed her during his regular public hours was probably not as potent as what he might offer her if she managed to see him during his after-hours when he charged high sums of money as a private doctor: "for us private treatment is very difficult to get". Every-day necessities, in combination with not being able to work properly, made it almost impossible for her to get the right treatment for her and her baby and so she was usually necessarily compromising either on her diet or her medicines. When I tried to assist her financially, the money usually went to lightening the burden of harassment by creditors. Though everyone in the colony was poor, Velli was stuck in a particularly difficult situation. Against this background, the interpretation of what it was to be "adivasi" that I got from Velli was revealing of quite a different "common sense" on adivasiness amongst ordinary adivasi workers themselves:

I: So what does it mean when you say "adivasi"?

Velli: "Nothing. The government [*sarkar*]...When we say adivasi, we mean the Paniya.

I: But what does the word mean?

Velli: It's not about the meaning of the word. That's only when we say Paniya—then we mean Paniya. It is the government who calls us adivasis. We are just Paniyas.

I: Janu [the AGMS leader] also uses this word though, she always talks of adivasis ... Why is that so?

Velli: She is an Adiya. She is also an adivasi.

I: But I never hear you talk about yourself as adivasi....

Velli: That's because she [CK Janu] has a job [*joli*], that's why she calls us adivasis. She is a professional, so she calls us adivasis... You see, we all have different songs. Their speech is different. Ours is different. The Naykkans, Urali, Adiya, and us, all these have different languages.

I: I see—but what about the Kurichias and Kurumas [officially ST and included in the AGMS]. Are they also adivasis? Which all groups are included in this group of adivasis?

Velli: Paniyas, Naykkans, Urali, and Adiya. These four…they are all not rich. They are also like us.

I: And these other two, the Kurichias and Kurumas?

Velli: They are different.

I: Are they not adivasis?

Velli: No, their caste (*jati*) is different.

I: Why so?

Velli: Why… because they have a lot of money of course! Anyway, it is not we who give ourselves such names as 'adivasis'. It's the government who gives such names. We are just Paniyas."

Velli's answer exposes different meanings of adivasiness. She starts by saying what should perhaps be obvious to all but nevertheless seems to elude most educated Malayalees: that "adivasi" is used as a synonym of "Scheduled Tribe", which is simply a legal category – "something the government calls us". Velli emphasizes throughout that the only category that she feels naturally defines her is that of being "Paniya", the name of her *jati* (caste) that at the same time literally means "worker", someone who does "*pani*" (labor – not *joli*, salaried work). When I confront her with the fact that it is not just the government but also the leader of the very movement she had joined to occupy land who speaks of "adivasis", she explains that this is the case because C K Janu is educated and has a salaried job: all such people have an understanding of adivasiness that coincides with that of the state. Yet then, as if remembering the mainstream, "proper" understanding of adivasiness herself, Velli also starts giving me the riddle of how many adivasi communities there are and how they all have their particular "songs" and other cultural characteristics, until I interrupt her to push her some more on whether then all groups that the state has listed as Scheduled Tribes are "adivasi". To newspaper-reading Kerala, it is obvious that Kurumas and Kurichias are "adivasi" and also Velli no doubt knows of the heroic deeds and legendary "tribal resistance" by the Kurichias against the British. Yet at this point, she decides to give her own reading of what it really means to be "adivasi": to be of a caste that is poor, which according to her excludes the Kurichias.

Velli's final interpretation of what really defines adivasiness – namely poverty – is a notion I often encountered amongst ordinary adivasi workers who had not been in leadership positions in the AGMS. A group of Adiya workers I was interviewing, once for instance got into a discussion that concluded that it would be great if one of the would become rich, "though we would then not be adivasi anymore". If anything, poverty and a lack of education were what many of them themselves saw as definitive "adivasi" characteristics. Despite the fact that

rhetorically "cultural distinctiveness" is a key point for the state to decide on Scheduled Caste status, Velli's interpretation is, moreover, not altogether different from the way the state *in practice* applies its criteria for Scheduled Caste status since often "forward" ST communities can become re-classified as Scheduled Castes or Other Backward Communities. Yet as I discuss in following, though playing on both the cultural definition of adivasiness and on its more practical interpretations, the AGMS has through conscientization tried to promote a more "proud" and politically assertive interpretation than is present in existing common-sense notions of adivasiness.

3.2.3 *"I AM AN ADIVASI, WHO DARE PLAY WITH ME NOW!"*

"Conscientization", often described in Kerala as "making people politically aware", involves changing people's existing idea of their social world - changing what has become taken as "common sense". As Gramsci argued, common sense is a powerful basis on which to build a political block but it is also problematic since its robustness indicates the political hegemony of the status quo. It is not a question of the lack of social and ideological manipulation but precisely an effect of the extent to which consciousness is shaped by existing relations of power. Yet as for Roseberry (1994) emphasizes, the hegemony that is crystallized in "common sense" is never a total achievement and needs to be constantly reworked in order to sustain itself against its internal contradictions and external challenges. This is where the potential for political intervention by "organic intellectuals" like C K Janu lies to give a new, emancipatory meaning to taken-for-granted ideas and turn "adivasi identity" into a tool to expose the contradictions and the violence – rather than the "consensus" - underlying common sense (cp. Smith 2004). Having been at the receiving end of "conscientization" efforts by liberation-theology inspired social workers in the 80s herself, Janu moreover had first-hand experience with Freirian methods of upturning common-sense and awakening a more politicized understanding of social reality[55].

One day I was talking to C K Janu about how the AGMS had changed the idea of what it meant to be adivasi and she told me:

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[55] *Bodhavalkaranam*, the raising of one's consciousness or awareness (*bhodam*), is in fact part of a long philosophical tradition (see Halliburton 2001: 1126). The early Communist movement gave it the interpretation of "overcoming false consciousness" but in the late 70s hey-days of the CPI(M)-affiliated but "non-political" popular literacy movement in Kerala, the KSSP, it gained a more explicitly Gramscian meaning and in Wayanad, it became part of the spread of liberation theology and Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the oppressed (Zachariah and Sooryamoorthy 1994: 80ff.) . In the latter phase, the beginnings of an emphasis on "adivasi identity" also started to appear.

> "Before the [Adivasi] Gothra [Maha] Sabha was formed, there were many incidents in which adivasis lost their identity and came in line with the mainstream. Those who are educated did not admit to being adivasi, they preferred not to come to colonies like this. But with the active work of the Sabha, there came a mentality among them that made them say 'I am an adivasi' without any reluctance. Earlier when I used to go to places, adivasis would not speak to me. I always tell everywhere that I am an adivasi. So they didn't come and talk to me, maybe they felt that if they talked to me, others would also view them as adivasis. ... Now that the Gothra Sabha has become this active and made them realize that adivasis all over the world have a distinct identity, people became interested in saying 'I am an adivasi'. These days when officers come to me they introduce themselves as adivasi. They say it because when we do it there is some kind of closeness between us. They never used to say that before. Now what happens is that the Gothra Sabha attempts to preserve the identity which the adivasis lost in earlier times. We give classes to children and form small groups to make them understand our tradition and our identity. This is an approach taken by the Gothra Sabha. Before, when people came to see me here, when officials who are adivasi came, they never used to say that they are adivasi. These days they do it. When they come to meet me they introduce themselves as adivasis. If they belong to SC [Scheduled Caste], they say that 'I am an SC'. They are not unwilling to say that they are Pulaya [one of the largest Scheduled Castes in Kerala]. This feeling came in people after the formation of Gothra Sabha. Our people never used to look boldly into the face of others and do things. But now when I go for work and stand in the city waiting for the bus, I have seen our people say things like "I am an adivasi, who dare play with me now!"... ok, the guy was drunk, and maybe he was talking from his unconscious mind...but still.. it was not there before...".

In the context of Janu's description of the AGMS's efforts to intervene in a common sense that depicts "adivasis" as ignorant and destitute, an identity to be ashamed of rather than take pride in, it is relevant, however, to remember Roseberry's (1994: 360) emphasis on hegemony as a concept to understand not consent but struggle and his emphasis, with Gramsci, that even though subordinate populations are never simply the deluded and passive captives of the state, their political organizations are also not autonomous expressions of subaltern politics and culture. C K Janu is trying to articulate a politically useful adivasi identity, yet she is not doing so under conditions of her own choosing. Recovering an adivasi identity, Janu implicitly argues, is something that cannot be done solely by proletarian, impoverished adivasis but needs the alliance of educated and government-employed Scheduled Tribes. It also is not something that can be left entirely to the common sense of adivasi workers – rather, it requires "classes" for adivasi children where they can learn about their "own identity". Whereas Janu describes the process as one of self-awakening and internal reform, her use of the "Scheduled Caste" category for dalits and emphasis on "adivasi" (ST) officials (who neither identified nor were identified as "adivasi" earlier) also plays on state-centric definitions. Janu sees the changes the AGMS has brought as the re-gaining of pride in one's "true identity but she also tells how the process whereby people came to "admit" this identity is inextricably tied to the activism of the Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha – that it was through the intervention of the notion of a shared "adivasi" identity that people came to feel "some kind of closeness" (rather than the other way around).

There are many contradictions involved in the process of creating an adivasi identity to take pride in – for instance, the fact that the process inevitably also invites humiliation. Moreover, while using the notion of "adivasiness" to launch a radical challenge to the status quo, "common sense" interpretations of adivasiness receive a new leash of life. I once asked Janu about the fact that that while talking about the identity of adivasis so much and claiming she proudly presented her "adivasi identity", she would usually go to press meetings wearing a sari rather than a traditional Adiya dress. She laughed and told me:

> "Then people will stare as if looking at a wild animal, if a person from us goes to a press meeting wearing our traditional dress. We can't even think of what that person will feel at that time. It would be a problem. But if we go wearing sari, nobody will stare since it is a common dress. So we can feel free. We have to accept certain things according to the situation, though we don't like it. We accept this not as a part of anything else, but as a part of finding solutions to our problems. Then it is ok. It becomes a danger when we do this to be a part of and to be accepted by the public and society. If I wear this dress to be a part of the common society, it is a danger. But it will not be a danger if I wear this as a part of solving the problems of our community."

It is hence quite literally in order to be heard – rather than stared at – that Janu adjusts the language and symbols of contention she uses. Her capacity, from her own adivasi working-class background, to negotiate the contradictions she encounters to effectively confront the status qua in no doubt a reason for C K Janu's leadership position in the movement. The project of "conscienticizing" gets a different expression amongst upper-caste and/or middle-class sympathizers of the movement, such as with K J Baby, a famous play-writer and the founder of "Kanavu" (Dreaming), an alternative, participatory school for adivasi children. K J Baby was one of the first to believe in the need for a proud adivasi identity and it is interesting to see how he describes the process he started with his pupils in the making of his famous play *Nadughadika*, in which the history of Paniya slavery and emancipation is dramatized. He claims that "thinking was a strange and difficult process" for his students (1993: 31). According to him

> "the refuge of the forests, the harmony with nature, the solace of one's identity with the tribe" had sunken into "depths of total restlessness" due to "poverty, ignorance and ruthless exploitation" (1993: 29).

This "ancient genus", "the only positive element in their drab lives" had been "completely lost". As K J Baby saw it, the challenge was to recover this genus to "re-commence their long stunted cultural growth" and provoke "thinking" in a "people who had completely forgotten their past" (ibid.). In songs describing their slavery, Baby only sees the "false consciousness" of seeing themselves through their Masters' eyes: "centuries of slavedom have now made them identify themselves as mere slaves" (1993:10), he claims, reading this for instance in the refrain of Adiya songs:

> "We are the slaves of the lords of the hill, we are the slaves of the lords of the fields".

K J Baby hence leans strongly toward interpreting the "ignorance" and timidity he observes amongst adivasis as fully internalized adaptations to oppression rather than as tactical adjustments to copying with – and confronting – existing relations of power the way C K Janu described her approach.

The discourse that seeks to liberate adivasis from thinking of themselves as "mere slaves" and from being "ignorant", "having forgotten their past", and having a "stunted cultural growth" hence comes to function as another element in hegemonic notions of adivasiness, likewise provoking resistance and strategic adaption by adivasi workers themselves. Thankamma, a Paniya woman I interacted with a lot during my fieldwork, at some point for instance told me she thought K J Baby was merely training adivasi children to perform song and dances for others – that he was "exploiting" them. At other times, during earlier encounters, she had often however praised K J Baby's work in "uplifting our community". This ambiguity and contradiction was in fact characteristic of ordinary adivasi workers' responses to efforts to conscientizing efforts. It for instance clearly accompanied the encounters I observed of Thankachen *mashe*, a Pulaya man Central Kerala who had come to the AGMS land occupation at Aralam to run a "*gothra padasala*", an alternative evening school "to generate and mobilize a tribal consciousness" amongst children of the various adivasi "clans" (*gothras)* and help revive the cultural unity of the original people of the area (including dalits). As I spent several mornings with Thankachen following his daily routines, I often sat by as he talked to adivasi elders – "*moopans"* – from whom he collected and recorded traditional songs and stories as well as other traditional knowledge, particularly of medicinal herbs. This knowledge, he would transfer to his students in the evening classes, in a wooden shelter that doubled up as a "temple". Talking to me, Thankachen often expressed his admiration of the kind of knowledge he was gaining from the adivasi elders. As he told me, "They may be wearing shabby clothes but they have beliefs that are far superior". His project, he claimed, was also helping him himself regain the "harmonious lifestyle" he had lost as a dalit.

One day I was sitting by as Thankachen, clad the kind of white dhoti befitting a *mashe* (teacher), was teaching one of the songs, "My Homeland", that he had

My Homeland
My homeland of eternal glory My homeland that flourished into glory Is stamping me down
I am the one who laid the foundation of ancient   civilizations I am the one who brought prosperity to this land With the power of my labor
The serf was left with nothing I became an out caste in my land The world I have built is mine no more
One with wilderness, I gained the essence of culture I turned sacred river shores Into salubrious fields
The land that flourished with my sweat The land in which River Bhageeradhi Flows with the power of my prayers
My homeland, my homeland
That trampled me down My homeland, which chained me Into the cages of starvation

collected in the morning from a Paniya *moopan* whom he considered one of the most "authentic" sources of adivasi knowledge at the land occupation: the children repeat the lines after Thankachan and after a while the *moopan* herself comes and sits on the side to watch the class proceeding. Having come somewhere halfway through the song, Thankachen turns to her to ask whether he is singing it correctly. She smiles ironically and says "Aren't you the one who should know best?". At this the class becomes a bit restless and the Paniya *moopan* sitting on the other side of the space uses the opportunity to start telling a drunken story, half falling off his bench as he does so. In reaction, one of the younger men standing around with a *thudi*(the traditional Paniya drum) to accompany Thankachen's singing starts making fun of the drunken *moopan*, parodying his gestures, making the disturbance of the "class" complete. And as Thankachen tries to restore order to the class, the drunken moopan spits his tobacco on the floor of the *padasala* – an act that Thankachen, well aware that the place is used at night as a temple too, cannot but show his disapproval of. He stops the lesson and looks distressed at the moopan, at which two young men standing around eventually pick the *moopan* up and escort him away, joking "his royalty retreats...".

The contradictions involved in the scene are hence palpable. On the one hand adivasi workers themselves – the parents of the children at the *padasala* –built the shelter and pay Thankachen *mashe* their tributes for educating their children into an "adivasi consciousness" that framed the struggle for land they are involved in. Participating in Thankachen's efforts to collect "adivasi culture" they moreover become explicitly aware of what is expected of them in this regard. On the other hand, the irony of a white-clad non-adivasi *mashe* teaching the children about "adivasi culture" while adivasi elders sit around to watch is not lost on those present, certainly as the elders implicitly start commenting on it. Caught between the need use the possibility of putting existing relations of power to their advantage as much as possible while at the same time needing to confront them, ordinary adivasi workers' reactions to efforts at their so-called conscientization are hence as ambiguous as the efforts of AGMS leaders to negotiate the Malayalee common-sense of what adivasiness is about. With all its contradictions, "adivasi" consciousness nevertheless remains crucial to the AGMS' efforts to forge an alternative "indigenist" political block.

3.3   CONCLUSION

"And just when they seem engaged in revolutionizing themselves and things, in creating something that has never yet existed, precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them

names, battle cries and costumes, in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honored disguise and this borrowed language" (Marx [1952] 2008: 15).

At the same time that an "indigenist" movement was taking shape –a movement that did not operate simply according to the scenario set by ethnographic state definitions of "tribality" – the various nodes of dissension within the indigenist frame also started to be mobilized by opponents. Hence just as a political movement was developing that posed a real political challenge to the status quo, counter-efforts of measuring the movement according to an imaged schema of "real" adivasiness intensified, as did efforts on the part of indigenist activists, for instanceat Muthanga, to fit their political challenge into time-honored tribal disguise and the borrowed speech of state ethnographers.

The political dilemma of indigenism is moreover reflected intellectually in indigenous studies scholarship, caught between a deconstructionist and a strategic essentialist approach. The deconstructionist approach to indigeneity considers "adivasi identity" a colonial and/or bourgeois-nationalist construction (see e.g. Bates 1995, Bindu 2009) that mixes notions of supposed indigeneity, a "tribal" way of life, and an official legal category (the "Scheduled Tribe") into an essentialist, romantic myth. It warns against the danger of the xenophobic shadows of indigeneity: nativism, "communalism", and "oppressive authenticity" through which proletarian adivasis who fail to fit romantic images of adivasiness become marginalized even further (see Baviskar 2007; Shah 2007; Sissons 2005; Whitehead 2007).

This chapter and the preceding one have drawn strongly from the deconstructionist approach as I have criticized the essentialized and essentializing meanings that have historically attached to the notion of the "tribe" and have paid attention to the political framing (rather than spontaneous fit) of social conflicts as indingenist ones. Ideally, such deconstructivist scholarship counters the reification of adivasi identity and creates space for more radical political interpretations. Had the influence of this scholarship been stronger on the media in Kerala at the time of Muthanga, perhaps arguments about whether or not the activists there were "real adivasis" could have been exposed as nonsensical from the start. Yet instead, merely a vulgar version of deconstructionism reached the mainstream media, where it worked to undermine the legitimacy of the AGMS precisely by showing that it was not led by "real adivasis".

This is a danger that the strategic essentialist approach warns for as it prefers to see adivasi identity as a social fact and a generally accepted reference to a shared (though not uniform) history of marginalization and resistance and a different way of life, embodied in those people asserting themselves as adivasis (see e.g. Xaxa 1999; Routledge 2003). Scholars working according to this approach are particularly sensitive to the fact that deconstruction can

undermine the legitimacy of adivasi identity as a political discourse and thereby disempower the many democratic initiatives based on it (Karlsson 2003). Such scholars are more inclined to place themselves in the position of adivasi activists and represent their concerns to a wider audience rather than see their role as also critiquing the contradictions within the movement.

The dilemma between deconstruction and strategic essentialism is real and I have no "solution" to it, though I do propose a way in which to at least go beyond the dead-lock of the two approaches against each other. For one, deconstructionist scholarship has exposed all the complexities and problems of "adivasi identity" but has seldom taken a logic next step to then ask why, despite all the problematic baggage it carries, adivasiness has nevertheless started to attract so much political energy. Why, despite the seeming inevitability of indigenism's nodes of tension, is it such a popular discourse today? The present chapter underlines the pertinence of the question of why activists undertook the effort of building an indigenist movement in contradistinction to the Communist movement, showing that not only historically and theoretically but also in practice, the attraction of indigeneity cannot be assumed to lie in the ready availability or simply "natural" fit of indigenism to particular communities' historical experiences but is in need of a complex political and structural explanation. By asking, more generally, under what conditions activists tend to reinforce rather than reject the stereotypical images directed at them, rather than discrediting contemporary adivasi leaders, I try to understand the limitations on political mobilization in a "neoliberal" age, as well as formulate a critique of the romanticized imaginary that global civil society demands of subaltern representation.

Strategic essentialist scholarship in turn has shown itself particularly aware of its potential impact on ongoing indigenist movements and the need to accommodate to global civil society. Yet even such scholarship can strengthen the movements in question all the more by focusing more attention on the political and economic grievances they emerge from rather than on the claims they make to a unique identity to overcome these problems. Attention to the structural causes for the rise of a moment moreover avoids the problem that precisely because scholarship indeed can have a strong impact on movements, if "strategically essentialist" in its reproduction of indigenist discourses, it can unwittingly create a self-reinforcing mechanism of further essentialism. In the following chapters, I hence turn precisely to the question of the underlying causes of the rise of indigenism in Kerala.

PART 3

CONTENTION AND CONFLICT

AT THE END OF A REFORMIST CYCLE

CHAPTER 4

ELECTORAL COMMUNISM AND ITS CRITICS

Part 3 of this dissertation studies the political dynamics through which social inequalities in Kerala in the course of the 1990s became contested in indigenist terms. The level of analysis here is that of "tactical" relations of power (Wolf [1990] 2001): those operating *within* a given political-economic setting as opposed to the "structural" relations of power shaping the setting itself (which I consider in part 4). I look, more specifically, at how indigenism arose from the interaction amongst the political parties and social movements most eager to confront poverty and inequality in Kerala, trying to go beyond the most common political explanation offered for the rise of indigenism, the "democratization" argument. The latter can be summed up as the idea that indigenism emerged in the past decades as states were forced by newly emerging "international norms" on the recognition of indigenous people (Jung 2008) to become more tolerant of "difference" and give up their attachment to "ethno-national homogeneity" (Yashar 2005). In this chapter and the next, I critically rethink this argument and question whether indeed the move towards greater "recognition" in liberal democracy necessarily signals a process of democratization.

Many scholars have been critical of aspects of the supposed "democratization" underlying the rise of indigenism. They have made similar observations on the complicated and even problematic relationship between indigenous difference and the state as I have in part 2 of this dissertation. The legal determinations of indigeneity and their distance to the everyday lives of many adivasis that I noted find echoes in Elisabeth Povinelli's (2002) critical description of how "recognition" of aboriginal communities by the Australian state happens on the latter's terms – she argues that the "cunning of recognition" lies in inviting new, sometimes even more all-pervasive forms of oppression. The importance of local interpretations of indigeneity, which I also discussed, is likewise stressed by Anna Tsing (2007), who argues that the particular history of the nation-state is still more important in defining political trajectories of indigenism than are the new technologies through which indigenous movements become part of a transnational scene. Beth Conklin (2002) has provided some of the most explicit analyses of how indigenous activists try to strategically deploy dominant images of indigeneity yet thereby also tend to invite difficult contradictions and liabilities. Hence there have certainly been scholars who have given a critical interpretation of the kind of "democratization" that may have produced the rise

of indigenism. Yet when analyzing the historical trajectory producing new indigenous movements, both those more optimistic about the possibilities offered by liberal democracy as well as those who have raised critical side-notes, tend to remain within the liberal paradigm. They have ignored the possibility that the rise of indigenism may have been caused not so much by the democratizing pressure put on states by the international indigenous movement but, on the contrary, by how a previous global cycle of democratization became locked in the state and thereby started obstructing earlier avenues of popular protest that indigenous people had been using. The possibility, in other words, that indigenism may be a symptom of states becoming in fact *less* sensitive to democratic pressure.

In Kerala, where all reasons combine to raise critical questions on interpreting the rise of indigenism according to the liberal framework as a process of democratization – the pre-existence of a state-determined common-sense about indigeneity, the weakness of transnational social movement influences, the perils that the strategic use of indigeneity discourses invite – we may well consider placing the causal emphasis for the rise of indigenism elsewhere than in "democratization". I seek to do so by addressing more explicitly the question of why indigenous people did not mobilize along existing political platforms. For if despite all pitfalls and limits, indigenism were the only possible program around which to rally for land rights and to challenge poverty and marginalization, its emergence would have to be a sign of democratization. Yet if mostcontemporary indigenist activists in Kerala started their political biography in Communist groups that claimed land reform and the emancipation of the "toiling masses" as their priorities and if the Communist party historically – and still – receives the majority of Scheduled Tribe and Scheduled Caste votes for this very reason (Thachil 2009), then the question we should be asking is why people in Kerala became attracted to indigenism*rather than Communism*. By asking this question and focusing on the political interactions of indigenous movements vis-à-vis the state, not just on their own but particularly in relationship to their main political rivals, a different perspective emerges – one that sees the rise of indigenism as caused more likely by the *crisis* of liberal democracy than by its forwards march toward a "completion of the process of decolonization" (Niezen 2003: 194).

Whereas the next chapter looks in more specific detail at the political dynamics between indigenist and Communist activists that further contributed to the distinct political form that indigenism took, in this chapter I set out to analyze the rise of indigenism through different activist biographies. These demonstrate the lived process of how contention against electoral Communismgradually, out of combined practical and ideological disillusion, turned away from "class" and towards a critique articulated more in terms of "culture" and "caste". The historical trajectory of the rise of indigenism against the background of the declining appeal of the original

Communist movement is hence traced through the biographies of five exemplary Malayalee activists: P K Kalan (life-long adivasi Communist party member), Vasuettan (lower-caste Naxalite turned indigenist supporter), Geethanandan (dalit ex-Nalite turned indigenist), C K Janu (practical adivasi Communist turned indigenist), and Soman (committed dalit Communist turned indigenist).

4.1   THE NAXAL CHALLENGE: MOBILIZING THE MARGINS

To be able to situate each biographical story, it is useful to consider the general three-fold periodization that most scholars agree on regarding the recent history of Kerala according to the vicissitudes of the Communist movement. The first period, in this scheme, starts in the 1930s and ends in 1957 with the coming to power of the Communist party in Kerala. This period is characterized by the convergence of three types of social movements under the leadership of the Communist party: the community reform movements that were particularly active in the southern Princely States of Travancore and Cochin where they were mobilizing to compete for "modern" social status and demand greater participation in public administration (Mathew 1989); the (Muslim-majority) peasant movements against the squeeze on their livelihoods by the colonial state and (upper-caste Hindu) landlords that dominated the northern Malabar region under direct British rule (Panikkar 1992; Menon 1994; Herring 2008); and the movement for Indian independence and Malayalee nationhood, initially under Congress leadership, that created an overarching framework bridging these regional movements. The coming together of all these struggles in the Communist movement led this period to be characterized by what Dilip Menon (2005: 308ff.) describes as "euphoric visions of a new order and a rampant rejection of past hierarchies". This found expression not only in a political movement organizing the proletariat and the peasantry into militant entities but also in utopian popular songs, literature, and films.

The second phase, from 1957 to about the mid-70s, in contrast was characterized according to Menon by the move to "electoral communism", what the radical Left called the degeneration into "parliamentary cretinism"[56], and the disciplining of cadres. It was a period of "organized class struggle" (Heller 1999), which as we will see in the second part of this chapter, is characterized alternatively as leading to the successful implementation of land reform and social welfare (as the Communist party claims) or, as many indigenists now claim, as leading

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[56] Parliamentary cretinism, a term Marx used in his *18th Brumaire*, describes the belief that a socialist society can be achieved by peaceful, parliamentary means.

issues of caste inequality to be brushed aside "as a largely upper-caste leadership assumed power and defined regional culture in its own terms" (Menon 2005: 310). It is generally agreed that the third phase, from the mid-70s, just as the United Nations had published its 1975 report praising Kerala as a model development state, came with declining class militancy, even of the organized type that Patrick Heller (1999) calls "institutionalized class compromise". It moreover became characterized, especially from the mid-80s onward, with a growing concern with Kerala's "lagging economy" (Williams 2008). Whereas the biographies in the first part of this chapter throw light particularly on the transition from the first to the second phase, those in the second part of this chapter better describe the shift from the second to the third.

Regarding the transition from "euphoric" to electoral Communism – and the Naxal challenge that emerged in the process -- the most well-informed, sympathetic yet critical insider's account is probably K Damodaran's as told to Tariq Ali (1974). K Damodaran was one of the early leaders of the Communist party and staying with the party (the CPI) till his death in 1977. He is however unusually open about his experiences in it. He talks critically about the Stalinist line that Malayalee Communists defended in the 1930 and 40s and about how they identified themselves completely with the Soviet Union[57]. He also describes how by following the dictates from Moscow, the party in its early phase stumbled from one blunder to the next. He argues that the strength of the Communist movement clearly lay in its grassroots, union-based organizing since despite the many tactical mistakes of the Communist leadership, the party kept a significant following. In 1948 the party leadership even adopted the notorious "ultra-left" Ranadive theses, which stated that the newly independent, Nehru government of India was to be overthrown since it represented "fake independence" - a highly unpopular opinion at the time that even many of the ultra-left Naxal leaders two decades later had difficulty in adopting (Banerjee 1984). Ironically, Damodaran points out, in practice the party was making an opposite turn: its decision in 1951 to participate in the General Election in order to replace the "anti-democratic and anti-popular Nehru government" by a "People's Democracy of Democratic Unity" in fact put it on "a course which can only be categorized as parliamentary cretinism" (Damodaran 1985: 355): "The word 'class' was replaced by the word 'party' and the word 'state' was replaced by the word 'government'." According to Damodaran, it was already then that the party started to become more interested in acquiring parliamentary majorities and in collecting allies to form governments than in class struggle.

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[57] This was recognizable to me since most Communist party members I interviewed in Kerala – including the critical and well-read ones - still defended Stalin as the hero of the Soviet Union and were convinced that criticism of Stalin's policies was mere CIA propaganda.

Yet immediately after the first Kerala election, the turn to parliamentary politics still boosted the party. As Damodaran describes,

> "Immediately after the victory the workers and poor peasants, in the main, were jubilant. They felt very deeply that the new government would satisfy their demands. There was a tremendous feeling of pride and strength in the working class. I remember hearing poor, illiterate workers telling policemen on the streets: "Now you daren't attack us because our government is in power. Namboodiripad is our leader. We are ruling." (1985: 357).

Their joy, Damodaran says, increased as they saw how uncomfortable the victory was for landlords and capitalists and as the Communists made radical speeches in the weeks after the election, constantly emphasizing their support for the struggle of the workers. What the Communists in power soon discovered, however, was the limits of effecting changes within India's federal set-up where civil servants receive their orders from the Centre rather than from Kerala's Chief Minister. Workers in turn started to discover that many of the promises of the Communists were restricted to speeches. As Damodaran says,

> "Nothing radically new happened and after a while the novelty of having a communist government began to wear off. In some cases jubilation turned to passivity and in others to open and bitter disillusionment."

Damodaran's own disgust with the reality of electoral Communism came soon after the election victory, when the police shot three workers participating in a trade union struggle against the owner of a factory in Quilon (now "Kollam"), led by the Revolutionary Socialist Party. Afraid to alienate the police and strengthen the anti-Communist campaign (the so-called "Liberation Struggle") that was gaining momentum, instead of condemning the action, the Communist government decided to justify it and even made Damodaran travel to the spot to make a speech to that effect. As he recalls in conversation with Tariq Ali, "that night when I returned home I really felt sick inside" (1985: 359).

The 1964 split of the party, into the CPI and what in Kerala became the more influential CPI(M),was another blow to the morale of many ordinary followers of the Communist party. It was generally understood as following a disagreement over whether to follow the line of the Soviet Union's agreement with Nehru, adopting the strategy of allying with progressive elements within the national bourgeoisie in a "National Democratic Front" and countering the Maoist line, or to instead wage an uninhibited campaign against Congress and in favor of a "People's Democratic Front". The disagreement became intensified, moreover, with the Sino-Soviet split in the early 60s (Nossiter 1982: 179ff.). Many Communist party members I interviewedstill, however, looked back on the split with pain and did not believe it was justified by any reason. Damodaran, who was intimately involved in debates within the party at the timeargues that

"the major reason for the split was internal differences related to the question of electoral alliances".

The leadership of the two camps, he argues, basically had a consensus on "parliamentary cretinism". The differences developed over the best tactic to win more seats: whether to break Congress by allying with other parties such as the Jan Sangh and the Muslim League (the strategy adopted by what became the CPI(M)) or whether to do so by aligning with progressive sections of Congress against itsRight wing (the option advocated by what remained the CPI). According to Damodaran, who stayed with the CPI, the consequent popularity of the CPI(M) was due to the fact that it claimed it had split off from a "revisionist", "Rightist" CPI that was struggling not for revolution but electoral victories. In reality, however, Damodaran observesthat the CPI(M) leadership was equally engaged simply in "trying to win elections" (1985: 369).

Under the influence of Chinese Communism, the early 1960s were also a period in which Communist party members reached out further into the rural areas, which later led to the rise of Naxalite factions splitting off from the party. It was hence that the party first appeared in the lives of many adivasi workers in this period as they tended to be concentrated in the more remote, rural areas. In the famous play on Paniya slavery and liberation by K J Baby - *Nadugadhika* (1993) - the advent of Communism in the region is parodied in a manner that has become increasingly common amongst non- or ex-party members. The landlord of the Paniya workers in question makes several appearances on stage, every time dressed in whatever happens to be the most convenient political outfit at the time: Congress flags at the time of Independence, red flags and empty Communist slogans as soon as the party appears as the more influential patron that may help him maintain his dominance over the workers. Not all adivasi workers, however, agree with this perspective. As we will see in the following sketch of the life of P K Kalan, C K Janu's uncle and a follower of the Communist party all his life,there were adivasi workers like him who genuinely appreciated the party as a progressive force. The following biographical portrayal of his engagement with Communism is based on an interview I had with him in the Spring of 2006 at his home in Thrisillery, in the late afternoon and evening of a day I spent at a CPI(M) rally organized in honor of Kalan's artistic achievements as president of the Kerala State Folklore Academy. My interview is supplemented with transcribed excerpts of an interview by anthropologists Namboothiri and Vinodkrishnanwith Kalan in May 2005. About a year after I interviewed Kalan, on November 17 2007, he passed away, having reached over 70 years of age.

4.1.1 KALAN: "PEOPLE BECAME HUMAN BEINGS WITH COMMUNISM"

Kalan was born around 1930[58] in Thrisillery in Wayanad as the eleventh son of an Adiya family. His parents worked the fields of whatever local landlord they were attached to that year: there was still the practice then of workers being exchanged amongst landlords, as if they were their property, at the annual festival of Valliyoorkavu[59]. During his youth, Kalan moved to Coorg[60] in Karnataka several times:

> "Probably some landlord in Coorg bought my parents. That was how things were then. We were sold and bought!".

Kalan remembers his parents working from early morning to late evening, only for his father to often return to the fields again at night to guard the crops against wild animals. The children meanwhile would be sent into the forest to graze the landlords' cattle. Just how hard this enslaved life was can be glimpsed from the fact that of Kalan's eleven siblings, only one, his elder sister, survived childhood. Also Kalan fell gravely ill once when he was still very young. The fact that he recovered was interpreted by the elders as a miraculous omen.

When Kalan reached his teens, the Tamil landlords his parents were working for at the time assigned him to look after the family's children. This allowed him to learn Tamil on top of his already existing command of Adiya, Malayalam, Coorgi, and Kannada. Because of a Malayalam textbook one of the landlords gave him, he was moreover able to gradually teach himself to read, practicing his skills on any scrap of paper or poster he could find. His ambitions soon extended to becoming *moopan* (headman), though initially his critical attitude towards some of the traditional practices of his community brought him in confrontation with the elders. As Kalan explained to me, there used to exist all kinds of "untouchability practices" between Adiyas, Paniyas, Kurumas and others in the area – inter-marriage used to be frowned upon. Kalan was against such practices "separating human beings" and over time the elders started accepting his ideas and seeing him as a reformer. He was made assistant to the *moopan* and eventually, after a lot of "training", became the *moopan* of his community.

When the Communist party started making inroads into the area in the course of the 1960s, Kalan had already achieved a position of leadership in his community. It was hence under his

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[58] There was no custom of registering births in his community at the time, or of counting age exactly – hence the vagueness around his exact age.

[59] The festival survives till today, held in March every year, but has now become a mainly "religious" festival- cum-fun fair (I visited the festival with people from Kottamurade -- see chapter 5).

[60] It was then called Coorg, as the British called it, and people still often call it that way though officially this district is now renamed Kodagu.

leadership that the community started becoming involved in the party. About his attraction to Communism, Kalan told Namboothiri and Vinodkrishnan,

> "We never knew before what communism meant for us. We only knew that they were working for a society in which there would be no rich and poor. We were told about a country called Russia where there were no poor and rich, where everybody is well fed and where every child attended school. The Communists told us that soon it is going to be a similar system in Wayanad too. Impressed by the stories I heard about Russia I was turning a Communist. I attended party classes regularly and soon I was becoming an active worker of the peasant movement led by the communist party. Through me the idea of a possible classless society was reaching my community members too. Every member of my community was becoming a communist".

Indeed, as Kalan told me,

> "People here became human beings with the advent of communism. Communism turned man into a human being."

To my initial surprise, in contrast to younger adivasi workers like C K Janu who never consciously experienced the system of slavery that existed in Wayanad until the 1960s, Kalan, who in his younger years did experience the system himself, is much more inclined to be forgiving or even affectionate about his former landlords. Unlike generations after him, he considers landlords' involvement in the Communist party not a sign of hypocrisy but rather a sign of their good intentions. The fact that the Communist party included both workers like himself and their landlords, he actually appreciates as it was precisely this that allowed the party to achieve a stunning accomplishment:

> "to end the system of bonded labor without any atrocities committed on us [in retaliation]!".

An excerpt from Namboothiri and Vinodkrishnan's interview with Kalan emphasizes this point:

> "Under the banner of the KSKTU [the CPI(M)'s "Kerala State Agricultural Workers Union"] we led victorious struggles against the local landlords, including my own. It was our struggle that led to better wages for the adivasi agricultural workers in Wayanad. I was in the forefront. The struggle led by us against the local landlords never turned violent. Both sides – the landlords as well as the agricultural workers – were refraining from any possible violent turn to the struggles. Probably due to this, even after the long struggles, the agricultural workers and the landlords were having a friendly disposition. Often the landlords sought our help when new settlers occupied the land. Many years later when I was elected as the representative of the District Council as a Communist Party member, the same landlord against whom we led a series of struggles in the sixties congratulated me by hugging me tight! It was one of the most touching moments I experienced in my life. Former landlords and we have changed a lot!".

Compared to other activists, Kalan is also remarkably disinclined to emphasize the differences between movements on the Left – between the Communist parties, between parliamentary Communists and the Naxals, and even between Communists and the AGMS. The red line through his actions is a flexible combination of loyalty to the Communist party and to "his" people and a practical strategy of avoiding violence. He even admits to having compromised with Congress

during the Emergency period (1975-77) when the government combined a policy of suspending civil rights and harassing (and often disappearing) Leftist activists, including Communists, with a grand 20-point *Garibi Hatao* ("Eradicate Poverty") campaign including the promise of effectively abolishing bonded labor, implementing land reform laws, and providing housing for the "economically weaker sections". As Kalan narrated to Namboothiri and Vinodkrishnan,

> "Without the consent of the Party, I shared platforms with local pro-government[61]sympathizers. It was not very comfortable for me ... but I had reasons to cooperate with them. It had much to do with a historic decision, the decision to abolish bonded labor, made by the Congress Party with regard to Adivasi communities in India. The decision had deep personal overtones to me. My community were slaves to local landlords for centuries. Almost all of my community members had tormenting memories of the things they had actually experienced. I too had similar memories. I moved from household to household telling my people about the consequence of the decision of the government to abolish slavery. I even shared the stage with state leaders of the Congress party glorifying the government decision. I never bothered how the Communist Party reacted to my association with the ruling party. My conscience was clear. Perhaps because of this, the party never took any disciplinary action against me. The party might have thought that I was practicing a clandestine political activity. Perhaps I was. Sharing platforms with people preaching views inimical to mine was a painful experience. But it provided some support for my community. An urgent decision was made by the then state government to allot 32 houses for my people in my village. I should add this too. The benefits however had no way altered the political priorities of my people or me. We all remained strong supporters of the Communist Party (Marxist)".

Throughout my interviews with Kalan, he showed sympathy towards Naxal and indigenist movements, yet stressed that in his view – and because of his personal circumstances – the Communist party's approach of avoiding violence was preferable over the Naxal attacks and the confrontational approach of the AGMS, both of which have invited police repression. About the Naxals, he told me,

> "The conflict we had with the landlords was moving in a new direction in the late sixties. Dissent was emerging in the local leadership of the KSKTU but we knew little of the rise of a more revolutionary group within the union. For us the young party cadres working with us were just party comrades who wanted to lead a more militant struggle. They insisted on us joining them. Some of my community members joined the radicals. I was not aware at the time that these young radicals were sympathizers of the 'Naxalites'. For me they were just comrades of the KSKTU."

It was only when he realized that they were in favor of a violent struggle against the state that Kalan became apprehensive. As he told Namboothiri and Vinodkrishnan:

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[61] Congress was not only in power at the national level (with Indira Gandhi as prime minister) but also in Kerala itself, though in coalition with the CPI, the Muslim League, and number of other parties. Chief Minister of Kerala between Nov 1969 and March 1977 was Achuta Menon of the CPI (in coalition with Congress). Kalan's CPI(M), adamantly opposed to an alliance with Congress, was in the opposition and only came to power again in January 1980.

> "I had reservations about the means they [the Naxals] opted for, but still I was sympathetic to them. Their leader, Varghese, who later was killed by the police in a fake encounter, came to my house a number of times, requesting me to take an active role in the 'Naxalite' movement in Wayanad. I had genuine sympathy for the leader and for the group of young cadres he was leading. I would definitely have joined them, but for my mother. She was seriously ill and she was insisting on my presence near her always. I had to keep my commitments."

Others in Kalan's community, however, did join the Naxals and even targeted the local landlord at some point. In connection to this, the police took Kalan in for questioning but let him go when they became convinced of his innocence. As Kalan told me,

> "Many who had sympathy for them [the Naxals] remained with the parent organization [the CPI(M)]. I did too. I became fully involved in the party. After all, it was this party that gave me my political awareness".

Kalan says his reasoning in this also drew on the lessons provided (in CPI(M) networks) by the experience of the Communist party in Andhra, where Communist militants led the Telengana uprising between 1948 and 1951 only to provoke brutal suppression by the Indian army and eventual political annihilation of the party in the state. Kalan repeated a suspicion I had heard many CPI(M) members articulate, that the violence promoted by Naxals, which was used by the state as an excuse to repress Communist parties in general, may well have been "fostered by the imperialist powers to destroy Communism in India".

When it comes to Janu, Kalan never condemned her in my interview with him and instead proudly told me:

> "It was for the first time a woman from our community rose up like that. It was the communist party who brought her up. She grew with us. Her father participated in our struggles for wages. She was still small then. When she grew up she came with us to the party and started working in it. She was talented. Had no formal education but still, when she participated in struggles, she grew aware of things. She grew with the party".

About the AGMS and the Muthanga struggle, Kalan stresses it were "foreign" infiltrations in combination with a "betrayal" by Congress that caused the violence at Muthanga. He downplays the differences existing at the time between the Communist party and the AGMS, instead emphasizing how the former came to the rescue of the AGMS activists when they were in jail. As Kalan told me,

> "I discussed this [the formation of a separate movement] early on with Janu. I told her: 'we will not be able to control the organization, others will come in between. We need to build it up gradually, locally, with help of the party – involving foreign countries is dangerous'. They didn't listen and formed an organization. The struggle happened. I'm not saying it was wrong. Struggle is needed. But there were some mistakes. Though it was not wrong. But it ended up hurting human beings and finally it was we [the

Communist party] who protested it. When they were arrested we went to Trivandrum, conducted a strike at the secretariat".

Kalan, unlike the activists whose story I present next, remained a loyal party member all his life, which seems at least partly related to the practical and tactical flexibility with which he managed to connect his Communism with the needs and aspirations of his Adiya community and his leadership position in it. The most explicit way in which he managed this was perhaps in his role as a Gadhika performer ("tribal folk artist", as newspapers call it) and president of the Kerala State Folklore Academy: he used his Gadhika performances, expressive recitals that as a *moopan* Kalan had become expert in, to introduce his community to Communist ideas while at the same time celebrating a particularly Adiya art form. Kalan also never got into any personal conflict with the Communist party. He was highly successful, through CPI(M) networks, in terms of becoming the first Adiya president of an entire block *panchayat* when in 1990 the party fielded him as a candidate in the local elections in Mananthavady. Yet while gaining a lot of recognition from the party and beyond in his role as *panchayat* president, Kalan, unlike some of the other activists I will discuss shortly, never got involved in fights over how *panchayat* money would be spent. His material ambitions moreover were minimal, having grown up owning absolutely nothing and having come to appreciate this as a "Communist" ideal. When other *panchayat* members reasoned Kalan was to have a proper house as *panchayat* president and decided to award him a 50.000 rupees award to that effect, Kalan rejected it:

> "I was comfortable with my humble dwelling that had no proper wall or roof. Communists cannot afford luxuries. I prefer dying as a Communist in this hut without the burden of any luxuries over me."

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Kalan's story is typical of those adivasi and dalit workers in Kerala's more peripheral regions who became actively involved in the Communist movement when it arrived on the scene there in the course of the 1960s. For such communities in the coastal, semi-urban areas of Kerala, where the Communist movement had been active already since the 1940s, increasing disillusion marked the late 50s and 60s instead. Many continued with the party because they hoped to be able to push it in a different direction, because their livelihood and status had come to depend on it, or because they held too dearly to the image of it as it used to be and the sacrifices people had made in the party's name. Yet there were also those who became inspired by the Naxalbari rising to reject "working within the system" and to part with the parliamentary-oriented Communist parties altogether. This early (late 60s, early 70s) Naxalite movement took its inspiration from the uprising of May 1967 in Naxalbari (in West-Bengal), led by armed revolutionaries who had until then been members of the CPI(M). It was only during this struggle that the revolutionaries broke with the CPI(M) to form the CPI(ML), which eventually came under

the leadership of Charu Mazumdar. According to the CPI(ML)'s most important chronicler and critical sympathizer, Sumanta Banerjee, the CPI(ML) was an outgrowth of a tradition of Indian peasant revolts and, in its rediscovery of the revolutionary potentialities of the peasantry,

> "posed a challenge to the ideological sclerosis of the parliamentary Left in India, which had settled down to the efficient management of the status quo by participating in a few provincial governments" (1984: iii).

By autumn 1967, the Naxalbari revolt had encouraged many erstwhile Communist party members to condemn the party for its "illusory" practice of capturing state power rather than "smashing the state machine". The "Indian Revolutionaries", guided by the "Thought of Mao Tsetung" set out to create "liberated zones" and confront the state, rather than capitalism, as their primary enemy (Banerjee 1984: 98)– a tendency that would continue with the later New Left movements. Though the CPI(ML) grew out of the parliamentary Communist parties, the violent repression of the Naxalbari revolt by the CPI(M) government in West-Bengal -- partly out of fear on the part of the CPI(M) that Naxalbari would otherwise provoke the Center to intervene[62] -- hardened the split into one of outright hostility.

Kerala was to be the first place outside of West-Bengal where Naxalism gained a following, even though a relatively small one of only about a hundred or so men -- and the odd woman, most famously Ajitha, the daughter of the main ideologue of the movement (see Ajitha 1990). According to T J Nossiter (1982: 359-60), the small number of Naxalites in Kerala was related to the relatively small number of tribals in the state, the success of Communist reforms in creating at least some minimal securities for the rural poor, the "provincial" character even of college campuses in Kerala, but also the "rurban" settlement pattern and traditional social controls of Kerala that make it virtually a "policemen's paradise" (ibid: 361). Yet a small group did emerge in the late 60s around Kunnikal Narayanan, formerly a secondary leader of the CPI(M) who got into contact with Communist radicals in West-Bengal and later, back in Kerala, started translating Mao's works into Malayalam and organizing reading groups. Of this group Areekkal Varghese, a young man from a poor Christian family that had migrated from Idukki to Wayanad in the post-WWII migration waves, was to become the most revered revolutionary. He was shot in February 1970 in what only recently[63] was confirmed to be a staged "encounter". Before

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[62] A repetition of sorts of the post WW I scenario of the Left in Germany where the split between social democrats and revolutionaries became so hardened that it undermined their necessary unity against the rise of fascism (e.g., Priestland 2010; Harman 2003).

[63] The policeman who shot Varghese, Ramachandran Nair, was himself in fact a Communist sympathizer and finally in 1998 publicly revealed the story of how he was forced by his superiors to be the one to pull the trigger on Varghese in a fake "encounter". On October 28, 2010, a special CBI court sentenced the superior officer who ordered the shooting, Lakshmana, to life imprisonment. A fictitious rendering

Achuta Menon, senior CPI leader and Chief Minister (in coalition with Congress) at the time, gave the order to round up the Naxalite movement – leading within months to its demise – the group had organized a number of successful attacks on police stations and notorious landlords. Ayinoor Vasu, the activist whose life I turn to here, participated in one of these attacks. As we will see, his life, having joined the Communist party in the 1940s when it was already strong in his native town of Kozhikode, exemplifies a rather different experience with the party than that of Kalan. Together with fellow anthropologist K C Bindu, I interviewed him on a long rainy afternoon in his home in Kozhikode in August 2009.

4.1.2 *VASU: "EVEN THE CPI(ML) BECAME SATURATED WITH UPPER-CASTE TENDENCIES!"*

Vasugrew up in the northern coastal city of Kozhikode ("Calicut" under the British), born in 1930 to the ancestral home of an Izhava, working-class family. At the age of 15 he had completed his 5th standard and started working at a factory near to his home town: the Commonwealth Trust Weaving Factory, one of the first textile factories in Kerala, set up by the

famous Basel Evangelical Mission in 1874. Though Vasu only ever attained the first year of upper primary school, his informal education is vast since he made intensive use of the system of public village libraries, public lectures, and political theatre plays that were part of the early Communist movement. "My university was this local library", he recalls: "this whole area owes so much to that library..". Already at the age of twelve, he was introduced to the "scientific socialism"of

Vasu at his home
On the wall: Lenin, Stalin, Phule, Ambedkar and Bhagat Singh

Krishna Pillai, an early Communist leader (who never lived to experience the electoral turn of his party since he died in 1948 of a snake bite; Krishnan 1971). Though Vasu's father used to be with Congress, Vasu grew up in a time when all radical activists once in Congress had now joined the Communist party. In 1947, Vasu became a formal member of the (then still undivided) Communist party, active in organizing the weaving workers of his area. With a certain nostalgia Vasu remembers the early days of the Communist movement:

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of the Varghese drama, interesting though sharply criticized by former Naxals, is provided in *An Iron Harvest* by C P Surendran (2006).

> "Comrade Krishna Pillai, the father of the Communist movement in Kerala, he was forming unions in our factory in Calicut. It was the proletariat, organized in unions, who actually formed the Communist movement then. Petty-bourgeois intellectuals and white-collar workers used to consider them *chetta* [lower-caste ruffians]. They were the people who had been formed by the library movement. The factory unions were the bases of the Communist movement and Krishna Pillai himself was a coir worker in Alleppey. It was a Communist party by the proletariat itself -- sure with some upper-caste elements -- but with workers at the base. These days they [the CPI(M)] claim the credit for this party but it's a totally different party".

When the party split in 1964, Vasu identified with the CPI(M) but soon became more inspired by Mao's thought, made clandestinely available by Kunnikal Narayanan. Heeding Mao's call to move to organize the countryside, Vasu went to Wayanad in the late 60s to help fight against bonded labor and mobilize the tribal workers of the area. At first, they fought to increase the amount of paddy (rice) paid to the workers -- later, under a lot of resistance from landlords fearing the end of the bonded labor system, they went further and pushed for wages to be paid in cash. As Vasu recalls of what he experienced in Wayanad at the time:

> "adivasis were really living under the torture of the landlord's *goondas* [henchmen] at the time. If they resisted at all, they were murdered. There were many such incidents. Comrade Varghese told me how in Thrisilleri there was this Brahmin who had murdered one of his workers and then tied up the body, pretending it was suicide...the police would do nothing."

In 1967, there was the first ever *gherao*-ing (encircling) of a landlord in Wayanad as part of Varghese's work (then still under the CPI(M)'s banner): the landlord's family was trapped in their house as workers stood outside demanding a greater measure of rice to be paid to them. By the end of 1967, the CPI(ML) was formed and by 1969 Vasu finally got to meet comrade Varghese, who was ten years younger than him and was already working underground at the time. As Vasu recalls, it was mostly the bonded laborers living around Varghese's base in Thirunelli who were part of the Naxal movement then and most of them were Adiya (C K Janu's "tribe") though there was also at least one Kurichiya (more "forward" ST community) among them.

To Vasu, the CPI(ML) made sense since the CPI(M) seemed entirely unaware of whom the most oppressed in society were:

> "They were always concentrating on urban workers, working directly with Marx' interpretation without adapting it to the conditions in Asia. The Chinese Communist party had some idea, because Mao himself had been working in rural areas in the 1920s. He wrote that you had to concentrate on the rural areas and capture the cities by surrounding them from the countryside. But the Indian Communist party really lacked any such insights. They always had in mind that the factory workers in places like Bombay were the ones to be organized. Even in Kerala, it was cities like Allepey, Calicut, Kannur, where coir workers and all were being organized – never the rural areas. It was a mistake".

What was an ideological mistake however took on a vicious turn as CPI(M) members became involved in attacks on Naxalites. Vasu recalls an incident in Nilambur where CPI(M) members were seen with the landlord's *goondas* killing a CPI(ML) comrade, Chandy, while one of the party members held a red flag. Vasu himself even was the target of CPI(M) attempts on his life and had to flee back to Calicut from Wayanad several times.

Unlike the CPI(ML) faction led by Kunnikkal Narayanan, Vasu did not, however, agree with the tactic of attacking police stations:

> "Narayanan believed the main enemy was imperialism whereas the Naxalbari leaders believed it was feudalism. I believe Narayanan made a mistake there. Of course both are enemies but when we need to concentrate strategically on whom to attack? I still believe Narayanan was wrong then. He was not clear about it in his mind that what we experience here directly is a feudal system. And that caste is the main issue in India – class difference is expressed through caste here. It's the ideological basis of Indian feudalism and what makes it so oppressive and enduring. The Indian Communists never really discussed this issue of caste and its ideology, the Brahminical ideology".

To explain the relationship between class and caste, Vasu recalls the metaphor of ice and water:

> "both are the same substance, ice is solid and frozen whereas water is fluid, it can move – caste is like ice, class is like water. This should be clearly understood by any Communist, but unfortunately few have understood it. Or even if they understood it, many leaders were upper-caste and so they would not act on it".

According to Vasu, land is the primary issue – and always has been in Kerala:

> "Even I remember making way for Brahmins on the road…the only way you existed earlier was through land and since the Brahmin owned the land, he was everything. It is this feudalism that is the main enemy we need to fight".

From this understanding, Vasu argued that the main strategy ought to be to organize people to claim land in defiance of the landlords – only then, when the police comes in, should they be prepared to counter that attack. Narayanan, in Vasu's belief, had it all wrong in wanting to attack the police directly. Ironically, the first time Vasu was captured by the police, in 1969, was when he had travelled to Narayanan's faction to dissuade them from attacking the Kuttiyadi police station.

Vasu was acquitted from the Kuttiyadi attack but captured by the police again in 1970, this time for his participation in the Thirunelli action -- the attack, led by Varghese, on several of the most cruel landlords in the area, two of whom were killed. Vasu was badly tortured by the police and spent seven and a half years in jail, mostly in solitary confinement. It was only he and Francis, the son of the Naxalite who had been murdered with CPI(M) compliance, who were put in solitary confinement for so long. Francis went mad and eventually died. Vasu only just avoided loosing his mind entirely:

> "It was the books my brother brought me, when he was still alive, that prevented me from becoming insane. Still, my relatives remember how when I came out of jail I would be talking aloud to the moon...many comrades in jail went mad".

When finally released in 1977, Vasu settled down in Calicut again and made a living running an umbrella and wood shop by day, helping to rebuild the CPI(ML) in the evening hours. Vasu also however became disillusioned with the new CPI(ML) he encountered, which to his astonishment, had again become led by upper-castes.

> "The CPI(ML) was supposed to be a proletarian party but while we were in jail, it had been filled with university graduates, upper-castes....I have nothing against upper-castes but I do oppose Savarna [upper-caste] ideology and especially feudal ideology ...and this is what happened, as with the CPI(M), even the CPI(ML) became saturated with these upper-caste tendencies!".

Seeing the new leadership reminded Vasu of what one of the police officers at the time had claimed: that he had personally planted his children amongst the Naxal leadership to destroy it. According to Vasu, two essential attributes of a real Communist party had faded entirely from the CPI(ML):

> "Firstly, the question of leadership: it was no longer the proletariat. But secondly, there was the ideology. A good ideology should be sharp, as sharp as that of the enemy and good for practical usage. Ideology should not be just an ornament that is not being used, it should be a strong weapon. Ideology should not just be correct, it should be used!".

Looking back, he regrets not having read Ambedkar while in jail:

> "That was a mistake. If I would have, I would have gotten a clear perspective and could have resisted the stealing of the leadership by the Savarnas that happened again with the CPI(ML). It is because at one point I was completely brainwashed by the CPI(M), portraying Ambedkar as a British agent. In fact Ambedkar did the class analysis, the work the CPI(M) should have done. What Mao did in China, Ambedkar had already done in India. Mao and Ambedkar diverge totally on solutions – Ambedkar imagines a bourgeois democratic government in the end -- but in terms of their analysis they are very similar."

Having lost faith in the CPI(ML) as it was, Vasu left it in 1981 and became closer to a number of Ambedkarites. He also started reading Ambedkar though his interpretations usually differed from those of Ambedkarites:

> "we talked often about the first volume of Ambedkar, '*On the Annihilation of Caste*'....only a Marxist will understand that this is actually a class analysis of India".

Looking back, Vasu does think the original CPI(ML) was important in several respects: enforcing the implementation of the until then merely *proclaimed* end of slavery, ensuring adivasi children started attending school rather than herding the cattle of upper-castes, and making sure adivasi workers were paid in money and that adivasi women working in upper-caste households got paid as well. And, Vasu adds,

> "there was a time, in the late 50s when the Communists were not yet paper tigers. When they were raising precisely the issue of land reforms and landlords saw to it that the government fell. Till the 1970s, there was no way of implementing the land reforms in many places. Only when the Naxals came was land reform implemented, when the landlords were too afraid to open their mouths, when they were given the choice: your head or your land. They beat us with one hand, certainly, but with the other they gave in to at least 10% of our demands. It was like a stone against a mountain, it was always clear the Naxalite movement would fail ... yet some things it achieved".

Still committed to class struggle, after leaving the CPI(ML) Vasu became particularly involved with the ongoing struggles of workers for better wages and more secure employment at a notoriously exploitative and environmentally polluting rayon pulp and fiber factory owned by one of India's wealthiest capitalist families, the Birlas, at Mavoor (near Kozhikode). In reaction to the fact that all the major trade unions (the CPI(M)'s CITU, the CPI's AITUC and Congress' INTUC) were colluding with management (see Mohan and Raman 1988), in 1983 Vasu became one of the chief initiators of an new, independent workers' union, the Gwalior Rayons Organization of Workers (GROW). In 1987, after the management had shut down the factory in reaction to workers' demands, Vasu once more found himself in direct collision with the CPI(M) since during GROW's earlier struggles, under a Congress-led government, the CPI(M) had sworn to have the factory re-opened as soon as it would have won the elections. In 1987, when it did, it however backtracked, first denying such promises at all and then arguing that the party was legally "helpless" to take action. In protest, Vasu and the other GROW leaders held many hunger strikes, accompanied by workers' demonstrations, hoping to at least secure retrenchment payment for the workers. Yet in an environment where capital was only happy to find an excuse to leave Kerala, the struggle could not come to a real success.

When in the course of the 1990s, Janu started organizing adivasis, Vasu hence found a much-needed new source of inspiration:

> "I noticed Janu for the first time when she came to Calicut with seventy adivasi women to hold a demonstration...I could not believe it!".

Vasu explains his surprise at the militancy of the women since he remembered the adivasis who were his comrades as much more timid:

> "I remember how adivasi men used to behave: in the Thirunelli-Thrisilleri action, we were just getting ready to go...we took a kind of last supper....we didn't know who would live and who would die.....it was in one of these Adiya's houses, some ten or twelve people were sitting around to eat. Two young adivasi men were sitting on both sides of me. Varghese had made them sit next to me - at first they did not want to sit next to me. They felt threatened by me....they were sitting next to me but slowly, slowly they moved towards each other and then towards Varghese because they were so nervous about sitting next to me."

His comrades were timid also during the actions against the landlords:

"We were with a group of Adiya men and at some point there was some shooting…there were four men, and the very moment there was firing, two of them straight away ran off…Now imagine this is the very same community from which a woman leader emerges and comes to Calicut to lead seventy women!".

When in 1993 Janu was brought to the district jail in Calicut because of her participation in a land struggle, Vasu hence went to talk to her. It was then that he realized Janu's movement was the fruition of the earlier Naxal movement:

"I asked her first where she came from. 'Thrisilleri', she said! I said, 'There were eight adivasis with me in jail, do you know them?' She said, 'A person called Kalan [not P K Kalan], my uncle was in jail.' I knew him!".

According to Vasu,

"Janu herself does not know she is the ideological daughter of the Naxalite movement. Even now she doesn't know – she is brainwashed in some way as to not give credit to the Naxal movement.".

Yet Vasu envisions Janu's movement becoming part of a bigger movement:

"There will come a time that people understand that their emancipation comes from Mao and that time Janu will be part of that movement also – she will see the iron shield of feudalism and see that caste can only be broken by guns".

To Vasu's regret, Janu never had the chance to become self-educated like he did with the library movement:

"She lacks more of an ideological base for the struggle – she thinks you can solve the question of land through peaceful means but it is not possible. The problems of landlessness will not be solved if some adivasis get land. Janu may be sure that some people will actually get land and lead middle-class lives without too much struggle but 70% of India lives in poverty….there's millionaires now but most of the people are in deeper poverty than under the British .. and adivasis are the worst of. And they are all caught in the agricultural sector. This oppression has been institutionalized by the state but the most important culprit is the ideology of Brahminism. I am not sure Janu has this clearly in her mind…".

According to Vasu, Janu runs the risk of repeating the mistakes of the early caste reform movements:

"these movements were going for material progress only – but you cannot have material progress in the same social set-up .. you need to see social reform as changes in the mode of production".

From this insight, Vasu has taken it upon himself to support Janu's struggle and hopes to lift it to a better ideological level. Vasu turned up in many of the stories of the Paniya workers whom I interviewed, who had stayed at his home after the Muthanga attack and mostly remember him, ironically mistaken, as the "CPM [CPI(M)] person who really cared for us!"[64]. Through his

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[64] Perhaps they thought Vasu was a CPI(M) member because of the portraits of Lenin and Stalin that decorate Vasu's home – as he himself explained to me, these were simply those that were "available".

interactions with Janu's movement, Vasu meanwhile is ever more convinced of the need for an interpretation of Marxism that focuses squarely on caste and finds its inspiration not in imported dogmas but rather in the vestiges of egalitarianism amongst lower-castes and especially adivasis. As he observes of his "adivasi comrades":

> "Even now there is this idea of sharing among them that you don't see amongst other communities. If a few make a lot of money, the whole group will not go for work that week and enjoy themselves…among non-adivasis you can have a starving person and a feasting person as neighbors. Amongst these adivasis, that will be impossible".

4.2   POST-COMMUNIST CHALLENGES: TOWARDS CULTURE AND CASTE

For many Leftists, the post-Naxal period, after the first and most militant wave of Naxalism had been brutally suppressed in the 1970s, "began in a mood of despair with the prospect of social transformation deferred yet again" (Menon 2005: 312). In reaction, the beginnings of what may be called the "New Left" in India started to appear: groupings that were still often influenced by Marxism yet were also critical of it and combined it in a heterodox manner with a variety of ideas from other ideological currents. There were the influential Dalit Panthers in Mumbai, inspired by Marxism/Maoism on the one hand but also by the American Black Panthers movement and Ambedkarism (Menon and Nigam 2007: 114). Again in Maharashtra (Ambedkar's home region), there also arose the Satyashodhak Communist Party which advocated perhaps the most salient mix of Marxist ideology and theories of early dalit leaders such as Phule and Ambedkar(Omvedt 1993: 67). The party's leader, Sharad Patil,explicitly propagated Ambedkar's warning that no true socialist reform would be possible "unless you kill this monster [that is caste] "(Patil 2009). To a lesser degree, Naxal activity also continued, though it faced increasing repression, which became draconian with the declaration of Emergency rule in June 1975. During the Emergency, more of the radical Left moved towards New Left movements in Kerala, and particularly to the People's Science Movement (or KSSP) that even adopted the slogan "science for social revolution" as its motto in the late 1970s (Nigam and Menon 2007: 116). After the Emergency had passed, and when by 1979 finally many of those imprisoned as Naxalites had been released from prison, a new cycle of Naxal organizing began, yet one that was more peaceable, all the more factionalized, and moreover ideologically deeply troubled. This new Naxal movement, rather than being an outgrowth of the Communist party itself, was moreover in opposition to it from the start.

It is this wave of Naxalism that Geethanandan, the activist whose story I turn to now, joined. Geethanandan became a Naxalite only to leave Communism behind altogether a decade later and eventually become the principal leader, besides C K Janu, of the AGMS. His life exemplifies

the trajectory that many such "ex-Naxalites" took, away from class and towards "cultural" politics. I interviewed Geethanandan on numerous occasions in 2005 and 2006 and I spent many days as part of his entourage. Unfortunately I never got the chance to visit his home since urgent politics he had to take care of always came in between: the court cases following Muthanga, municipal elections, conflicts with the CPI(M) at Aralam farm. Missing an opportunity to meet Geethanandan at home and not being able to sit down for long afternoons to discuss his personal biography, I however had all the more chance to see him in action as an activist and learn of his political dilemmas.

4.2.1 *GEETHANANDAN: "I HAVE TOTALLY REJECTED SUCH STATIST POLITICAL SYSTEMS"*

Geethanandan was born to a relatively well-to-do dalit family in 1954 in Thayyil in the northern district of Kannur, a stronghold of the Communist party in Malabar (Northern Kerala). During his college days in the early 70s, while he was studying Marine Biology, he became attracted to the CPI(ML) that was of growing influence on campuses around India at the time. In 1979, he joined a Naxal faction led by K Venu[65], theCPI(ML) ideologue who had been imprisoned during Emergency for his involvement in an attack on a police station in Kozhikode. After college, and while involved in the CPI(ML), Geethanandan worked for years at the Accountant General's Office in Thiruvanathapuram in a stable but dull job. Within the CPI(ML) fierce debates were going on at the time on the caste question and, still inspired by Maoism, there was a deepening dissatisfaction with "Western" versions of Marxism that ignored non-Western forms of oppression, particularly those of caste.

Geethanandan became particularly interested in the work of Engels and his discussion of the work by ethnographers like Morgan on pre-modern, more egalitarian forms of social organization:

> "Engels read many anthropologists who were there at the time…he analyses this primitive set-up where exploitation was not possible, it was like an original commune. There are places where this still remains".

Through his understanding of the traditional tribal societies described by Engels, in combination with a rising critique within the CPI(ML) of the continuing Stalinist praxis of the CPI(M), Geethanandan gradually became convinced that not class struggle but the struggle against the

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[65] During the early, exploratory phase of my research in Kerala in 2003, I interviewed K Venu, notorious amongst my CPI(M) friends for defending aspects of "globalization" and, according to them, abandoning Marxist analysis altogether.

centralized state ought to be the primary revolutionary aim. These thoughts were reinforced by the calls for reform that emerged with Gorbachev as General Secretary of the Soviet Union, which had strong reverberations in India, including on the CPI(ML). Developmentswithin the Soviet Union confirmed to the Indian revolutionaries that the country had indeed become "social imperialist", hardly any better than its American imperialist counterpoint. These debates led to yet another factional split of the CPI(ML) in 1987 and eventually, by 1991, differences of opinion on how to proceed on the "caste question" and a general malaise with Marxist theory had become so prevalent that K Venu decided to disband his CPI(ML) faction altogether.

In line, it seems, with his political conviction on the need to break caste and patriarchy through inter-marriage, Geethanandan by this time had married a Nair (upper-caste) woman and left his job at the Accountant General to become a full-time activist. He moved to Thrissur where he concentrated on organizing workers in the informal sector – a strategy that had been a core program of the early Communists and was, under pressure the CPI(ML), being revived as a key strategy to further the emancipation of workers. The lack of attention to the problem of caste due to the dominance of Communist ideologies however started to bother Geethandan all the more in this work. Often it were caste taboos and the desire on the part of those higher up the caste hierarchy to avoid begetting the same formal status as those considered lower in the hierarchy that prevented any united efforts at unionization from taking place. In an interview in 2007 in *Tehelka*[66], the major caste-conscious news journal in India today, Geethanandan claims this was the time when he became a "dalit activist":

> "The trade union activities in Thrissur made me a dalit activist. The people I worked with were extremely poor dalits. Their problems required a caste-based approach rather than a class-based one because the discrimination against them was mainly caste-based. The Left never had any satisfactory answer to caste-based problems."

After Venu's CPI(ML) faction was disbanded, Geethanandan had decided not to follow any Marxist grouping anymore and instead increasingly turned to an ideology based on dalit and adivasi culture -- even though some activists in the dalit networks still eyed him with suspicion

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[66] "Class struggle isn't enough", interview with Geethanandan by Ka Shaji in *Tehelka* 12 March 2007.

as to what extent he really appreciated Ambedkar over Marx (as one dalit activist told me:

"Geethanandan's head is always with Engels"). Geethanandan himself, however, claims to have

> "totally rejected such Communist movements because they are all centralized political systems".

In line with – though having left -- the CPI(ML)'s view of the state as the main enemy,

Geethanandan explained to me that statist political systems

> "like the Brahminical state, or the caste structure...this same thing is there within the Communist Party. Just like the capitalist state, whether it's a capitalist state, a Brahminical state, or a Marxist state, they're all statist orders, they all have this graded hierarchy and power structure. I wanted to negate that structure, I wanted to go another way."

Geethanandan, indeed relying on Engels' study of primitive society, saw the negation of the

recurrent problem of hierarchy within any state structure in earlier social forms, and

particularly "in our culture, the traditional dalit-adivasi culture". He became inspired by what he

calls "our culture, not by any ideology, not by anything from outside". Thinkers such as

Ambedkar and Ayyankali were not so much ideologues for him but representatives of this

culture, their ideas rising organically from the more egalitarian social forms that live on in dalit

and adivasi communities. As Geethanandan says,

> "it is not about intellectual work but about our own cultural ideas and cultural background. We had our own way of life, that is the ideology – nothing more than that. We can use our life, our culture, our land....to deconstruct and reject the higher systems. Of course Renaissance leaders are there, Ambedkar is there, Ayyankali, tribal leaders also...so many people. But you cannot say exactly who is the spokesperson, who is the intellectual, who created the ideas, it emerges from our culture."

Hence though emerging from a very intellectual political grouping and while widely considered

the strategic "brains" of the AGMS, Geethanandan gradually placed his faith ever more in what

he considered the opposite of ideology, namely the egalitarian "culture" of the original, primitive

society living on in the world's indigenous people:

> "our cultural traits and our cultural heritage is scattered in different areas and different countries and we would like to assimilate all these things. Who created this, is there a particular intellectual who created this culture? No...".

As many radicals growing up as part of Kerala's ideologically conscious but increasingly

impotent Communist movements, Geethanandan even came to see the situation facing adivasis

and dalits in Kerala as more problematic than in other states:

> "it's because of so many factors, this Communism, this modern education... we are very scattered here because of it in our culture and ways of life - more scattered than in other states".

Travelling to other states, Geethanandan claims the original culture he is inspired by is usually stronger there, leading towards more spontaneous rather than "strategic" politics:

"They won't be thinking in this particular, rational eh...way...they will be reacting immediately, spontaneously. But here [in Kerala] we will be thinking about this or that ideological question, having such debates and...nothing, nothing [happens]. When things happen to our people in Kerala, we think immediately about the ideology. The ideology question.. we debate and do nothing. But outside, in Tamil Nadu for instance, they react immediately...then only some ideological question may come [laughs] ....it is totally different."

Geethanandan's frustration with endless ideological debates, especially in a context where they seemed increasingly distant from political praxis, attracted him to a movement he sees as simply acting on the basics, without any ideology and strategy:

"This movement, our movement, it's just people who are fighting for the right to live. That's our concern. To live. To have a political front for the right to live. That's the idea. That's the only idea behind our politics and our actions."

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If in the 1970s, Communist ideology was still a living force in the radical milieu of the urban college campuses in Kerala where the second wave of Naxalism was born, those encountering Communism for the first time in the 1980s could easily mistake it for an obscure and flexible discourse allowing those claiming to stand on the side of the "poor" to prioritize a policy agenda of attracting business investment over defending whatever social gains had been made through class struggle by workers and peasants. The CPI(M) in the 80s was a party in the midst of a growing existential crisis and the escalating factionalism of a reformist leadership versus an orthodox old guard. Neither faction, however, was willing to be open to the New Left. Instead, the 1980s, with the rise of the BJP, were characterized by a "vigilance" amongst the parliamentary Left for "divisive, communal and separatist" forces (Surjeet 1998: 177). Identity-based mobilizations – whether Hindutva or not at all – were inevitably seen as representing such communalism. Only barely, moreover, did the CPI(M) leadership manage to remember there were greater class enemies than the few fragmented Naxal groups that were gradually succumbing to their own ideological dilemmas. In states where the parliamentary Left had but a marginal presence, local units continued to participate in popular struggles yet in West Bengal and Kerala "realism" reigned amongst the parliamentary Left, used to justify its "necessary" compromises with neoliberal rule in the creation of Special Economic Zones and the acceptance of financial loans conditional on cutting public services (Menon and Nigam 2007: 107; Steur 2009).

The 80s were also the time in which Liberation Theology started to spread through Christian networks in Kerala, taken up by the more radical, Leftist-inclined clergy who took it upon

themselves to organize welfare projects to empower and "conscienticize" the poor. Liberation theology reached the peak of its performance in support of the agitation of Kerala's fisherfolk[67] (another historically oppressed community in the state) from 1984 to 1988 but was not confined to the coastal areas. Also in Wayanad, Liberation Theology had a definite influence on the clergy. Many of them, after coming into conflict with the defenders of the status quo within the church networks, left the church altogether and instead embraced the new opportunities opening up in the 1980s to continue their activities by founding NGOs. This is for instance the trajectory of Jacob Lukose[68] who in 1987 founded Hilda, the "High Land Development Agency", in Sultan Battery (Wayanad). It is also that of the founders of Solidarity, an NGO based in Mananthavady (Wayanad), that from 1982 on aimed to (in the words of K Narayanan, one of its founders) "educate, conscientise, and motivate" the poor and "mobilize their own power" with the help of Freirian pedagogical methods. From an initial focus on "backward classes", the "tribal population" increasingly became the target of both Hilda and Solidarity's projects.

In the words of her uncle P K Kalan, the late 80s, was the time when Solidarity "captured" C K Janu, who went on to become the leader of the new adivasi movement emerging in Kerala in the 1990s. I turn here to her story next, composed from two long interviews I had with her at her home in Thrissileri combined with stories about her youth that I lend from a biography of C K Janu, *Mother Forest,* published in 2004 by the Malayalee social activist Bhaskaran. The latter, the text of which is entirely transcribed from taped conversation, is an invaluable source. Yet the text is also frustrating as the translator, Ravi Shankar introduced a number of stylistic oddities, including using what he calls "the simplest language possible", in the hope of staying close to what he believes is Janu's "inner world" (Shankar in Bhaskaran 2004: xii). I should warn that this translation style, in the few quotes I use from the book, should not make the reader mistake the wit and irony that characterizes C K Janu's speech (as I experienced it during my own interviews) for naïveté.[69]

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[67] There are interesting parallels between the trajectory of Kerala's fisherfolk/fishworkers activism and the AGMS. The fishworker's independent organization, the KSMTF (formed in 1980), for instance prompted political parties' trade unions to focus on fishworkers' rights just as the AGMS prompted them to focus on adivasi rights. A shift from "class" to "identity" was moreover apparent amongst the fishworkers too – as Baviskar, Sinha, and Philip (2005: 232) observe, "[c]aste, community, and economic nationalism now dominate over liberation theology, class, and gender discourses in the way the movement frames justice and ecological issues".

[68] I interviewed Mr. Lukose of Hilda and K Narayanan and Jose Sebastian of Solidarity in 2005.

[69] Certainly in the context of the general stereotypes on adivasi women as "innocent" and "childlike" (*pawam*), I do not think using this odd style of translation (strange spellings, overly simple words, leaving out upper cases) was a good idea.

4.2.2 *Janu: "They were just using people to get votes and lengthen their processions"*

C K Janu was born in Thrissileri, in Wayanad, in exactly the period when radical Communists were organizing there in 1967-68. As written in Bhaskaran (2004):

> "When I was very young, I had heard adults talk about Verghese [Varghese, the Naxal leader]. They used to talk in hushed tones. I have heard that Verghese used to be active in the Thirunelli area. Though our people had great respect for him it was also mixed with some amount of fear. I heard that Verghese had led agitations against *vallipani* [the system of bonded labor at the time] [..] I have heard that people like Verghese worked against this. Still, because of interference by the police and the [Communist] *Party*, our people were frightened into not speaking openly about Verghese [...] I have heard that Verghese paid a visit to a *jenmi* [landlord] in Thrisilleri and forced him to measure out the grain without chaff. Verghese was a man without fear. The new migrants who appeared amongst us are also not afraid of anything—the tree, the land, the forest, anything. I have heard that Verghese was very close to the people in our community and was keen to understand the problems of our people directly. I heard that Verghese took the trouble to live in our huts to understand us better. Apart from this, I have heard that he objected to the *jenmi* measuring out wages in bamboo measures and forced him to use a litre[70] measure. For all these reasons our people had great respect for Verghese. There were people in our community who had worked closely with him. But I have never seen him" (Bhaskaran 2004: 36-67).

Janu's mother and father, a *moopan* (chieftain) of the community, both worked for one of the *jenmis* of Thrisillery, a formidable institution whom only showed himself in person one or two times a year, leaving the supervision of the work to middlemen. As Janu told me, she had always associated the party with the landlords in the area since party members would often visit them

C K Janu at her home

– "I assumed they too were with the party - and most of them were". After having worked at age eight to nine as a maid looking after the baby of a female teacher in a nearby town, Janu returned to work in the fields with her mother, who collected her wages at the time since her father had re-married and was no longer supporting the family. Hunger was an everyday experience during this period: even in seasons when there was enough work, all they got was *kanji-vellam*, rice soup with more water (*vellam*) than rice, which had

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[70] Before the Naxal movement became active in Wayanad, it was common for landlords to pay adivasi agricultural laborers in kind –in a quantity of rice - rather than in cash. It was common, moreover, for the landlord's middlemen to use bamboo vessels that were imprecise and of course adjusted in their favor. Another way they tried to increase their share was by measuring the amount before the chaff and stones were removed from the rice.

to be supplemented by digging for tubers in the forest. The fear of starvation was constantly in the back of people's minds. At the age of fifteen, when she was spending her days working the fields, Janu for the first time had the chance to join one of the Communist party's rallies in Kalpetta, Wayanad's capital. In the text recorded by Bhaskaran (2004), she describes how nobody went to work that day, exited by the prospect of a day out. They were taken to Kalpetta in a lorry flying a red flag, with a party worker shouting slogans that they all "echoed in a loud voice". At the meeting itself, songs played about workers toiling in the fields, about sickles and hammers, and wages. Of those experiences, Janu says she liked them though she had no idea at the time of what the slogans and songs were really about. Unlike for elderly adivasis and dalits, for Janu the early and radical spirit of the Communist party itself is a distant past she never personally experienced. Varghese's ideals of transforming relations of power in the countryside were not something Janu associated with Communism. Instead, Janu's came to know Communism for its purely economistic promises – she considered the party a tool to get higher wages.

As part of the many projects for tribal literacy emerging in the early 80s, Janu's sister was taken to attend school in a nearby town and live in a tribal hostel. Janu herself, however, never went to school. When she was around sixteen, KANFED[71], the Kerala Association for Non-formal Education and Development, started to organize literacy campaigns in the area and a girl from the same caste as the *jenmi*, a Warrier, sometimes came to give classes after work. To Janu's frustration - as she wanted to learn to read and write - the girl seemed to be more interested in being able to claim her allowance from the organization than in actually teaching. Nobody in fact learned anything through the project and in a way this was logical since

> "after toiling the whole day in the slushy fields it was very difficult to light the lamp of Literacy. one[72] would just feel like gulping down something and curling up to sleep" (Bhaskaran 2004: 23).

Janu's experiences with activists of the KSKTU (the CPI(M)'s agricultural union) coming to visit them - usually to take people from the area for party processions - were better. She recalls liking them at the time and trying to use the pamphlets brought back from party processions to practice reading. What really helped her to learn reading and writing, however, was the arrival of Solidarity activists who were genuinely committed to teaching. Janu remembers how Sibi, the man who taught her, used to behave as if he was one of them, not bothered by caste taboos: "he would partake of the *kanji* and *chakka* curry made in our hut" (in Bhaskaran 2004: 24). He would

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[71] For some reason transcribed as "Canfed" in Bhaskaran (2004: 22).
[72] Translator's odd style of not using upper cases.

moreover, "tell us about our own starvation and the meagerness of our wages" (ibid.)[73] Enticed by his enthusiasm, Janu says she would practice writing on a slate till deep in the night. After a while she was confident enough to start teaching others and become a literacy worker herself.

As Janu became increasingly active in the KSKTU, she also started to regularly attend party meetings and classes and propagating what she learned to others. Doing so, she regularly travelled to other adivasi communities and in the process learned more and more about the general problems they faced – problems she at the time still believed were to be tackled through the party. Looking back, Janu says the party was indeed instrumental in forcing employers to honor wages, yet in a rather predetermined manner. When an employer failed to pay up, the party would support agitations but postpone the settlement in favor of the employer and in order to give more publicity to the party. Eventually, some party leaders would then orchestrate a behind-the-scenes settlement that would make sure the workers got at least part of the wages they asked for. Another variation would be when they would want to demand higher wages and the party would organize a strike and forbid people to go to work while the landlord, whether he was a Communist party member or not, brought in laborers from elsewhere to do the work. Only after they had sung enough songs and chanted enough slogans, usually just around election time, would the party then step up and come to an agreement with the landlords in question – often themselves party members – and make sure there was a compromise: "Agitations for one rupee increase in wages would be settled with a fifty paise increase", so that people were at least left with the feeling the party stood with them (Bhaskaran 2004: 30).

Janu however felt increasingly uneasy about party classes. It seemed to her that issues of importance to her community – like agricultural land or better conditions of living – hardly ever found their way onto the agenda of party meetings. It seemed party members were doing their best not to let adivasi workers speak and to talk to them in a dense, incomprehensible language full of "tricks". Also,

> "Somehow, whenever we raised issues relating to us in the Party the Party men would say that they had to consult their upper committee. The Party would just evade the issue. I have seen EMS [Namboodiripad]. He came for a Party class. In our area, the Party, the *jenmi* and the estate owners had grown to merge into a single giant tree" (Bhaskaran 2004: 35).

As Janu emphasized to me in this respect,

> "To the party, our people were just voters to win elections, it never really cared about us…".

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73 Something I certainly expect Janu told Bhaskaran with a hint of irony – note the words "our *own*".

The trigger for Janu's break with the Communist party, as she told me, was the struggle over a piece of land near Thrissileri that Adiyas used as a burial ground. They did not have the official ownership papers to the land but considered it traditionally theirs. When farmers from elsewhere started settling on the land around it, Janu and others feared that soon they would have no land left to bury their dead. On top of this came the fact that the Forest Department had increasingly been restricting people to enter the forest to collect food or fire wood while even the land that people had been using to cultivate subsistence crops around their huts was increasingly taken over by settlers with better connections to the municipality and ways of legally appropriating the land. Anger over this, combined with the prospect of seeing the land where their ancestors lay buried also become encroached by others, enticed them to build a fence around the burial ground to prevent others from taking it and to cut a path to be able to reach the burial ground. At this, the farmer whose land the path crossed called in the police, who arrested the adivasi men involved in the action. Since the women involved were still free, however, they marched to the police station demanding the right to their burial ground. Sixty women squatted in front of the police station, insisting they would not leave until their right to the land was confirmed. At that point, rather than supporting their claim, the Communist party stood up on the side of the farmer: it turned out there was an election of the local cooperative bank forthcoming in which the farmer's vote would be crucial and so the party tried to settle the issue in favor of the farmer. Janu found herself directly in opposition to the party and decided not to compromise. Instead, she decided to leave the party for good.

After leaving the party in 1991, what Janu had considered benevolent gestures of goodwill of the party in her youth, she increasingly started to see as just hypocritical and malevolent strategies. Reflecting on the burial ground and other such incidents, she came to find the party always standing on the side of "money and power":

> "To the Communist party, workers and landless people like us were just the ingredient of their rallying songs, the ornaments for their slogans. When we were starving, some leaders would announce another free kilo of rice, that's all".

Reflecting on how adivasis would figure in the party's ideology Janu told me:

> "The party is great at creating folk arts academies, writing research papers on how poor we are, how we beat the *thudi* [drum], on how we dress, what plants we take as medicines, all "under threat of extinction"… It was in the interest of the party to keep us starving and poor, so they could use us to fill their processions."

According to Janu,

> "I knew that from within the party I could never do something for my people in an honest manner. … Yes, I was a member of the party. But I resigned from it.Why didn't they form this AKS [the CPI(M)' adivasi wing set up in 2001] and try to get land that time itself? When we formed the Adivasi Gothra Mahasabha, conducted struggles by occupying land, made some agreement, started getting land, then they formed the AKS

for fear that people would leave the party. A party that was in power and lost power so many times over the years…. Otherwise they would not have done this."

Janu is explicit about the reason for the rise of the AGMS, namely the demise of the Communist alternative. As she told me:

"If theyhad formed this AKS while I was in the [Communist] party, I would not have formed the Gothra Mahasabha. At the time when I was in the party, had the Left movement formed an AKS and conducted struggles for land, I would have come as a leader of that struggle. I would not have formed the Gothra Sabha. I had to form Gothra Sabha out of the bitter experience that they, at that time, were just using people to get votes and lengthen their processions. Otherwise I would not have formed theGothra Mahasabha."

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In the 1990s and 2000s, after Janu had parted with the Communist party there would be others, who had been with the party for longer, whose loyalty to the party finally broke off as the gap between the ideals with which they joined the party and the reality of how the party operatedstarted to become grotesque and, moreover, started to turn against those unwilling to embrace the changes.Initially, in the early 1990s, it had seemed for a while that the CPI(M) would be able to reinvigorate itself due to the People's Planning Campaign, launched as a novel experiment in decentralized, village-level planning (see Isaac and Franke 2002). The plan was greeted with optimism by many New Left movements that were critical of centralization and keen to move away from grand narratives towards concrete local projects. Yet it also increased factional fights between the orthodox old guard and new reformist leadership within the party (see Menon and Nigam 2007: 108). The whole decentralization campaign came to be seen in a less optimistic light moreover when it emerged that the main ideologue of the campaign, Thomas Isaac, had as Finance Minister negotiated an Asian Development Bank loan that was conditional on a retreat of the state from social welfare orchestrated through "decentralization" (ibid.). The increased importance of *panchayat*-level decision making on the distribution of funding moreover increased the likelihood of even ordinary party cadres becoming entangled in – or appalled by – shady schemes to appropriate public funding at the local level. Indeed the 1990s were also marked by unprecedented degrees of corruption at all levels – including high-ranking leaders of the Communist party (Menon and Nigam 2007: 108ff). Most notorious became the "Lavalin scandal" in which as Minister of Electricity in the CPI(M) led government, Pinaraji Vijayan, who later even became State Secretary of the CPI(M), brokered a shady deal: against an excessive price he had a number of hydro-electric generators replaced by the Canadian company SNC Lavalin, despite having been advised by a government committee to consider alternatives.

It was these kinds of corrupt practices that were the final straw for Soman, the last activist whose trajectory I consider here[74]. From Kottayam -- with Alleppey one of the heartlands of the early Communist movement -- Soman had joined the party in the mid-sixties when he was only fourteen years old. It was more or less the same time when P K Kalan in Wayanad joined the party but Soman did so at a younger age and in a region where the party had already been heavily consolidated. His experience with the Communist party is hence more similar to that of Vasu. Yet it took longer for Soman than for Vasu to translate his disillusion into a turn away from the Communist party since there was less Naxal influence in the region of Kottayam. where the strength of the mainstream Communist party kept it at bay. The revolutionary difference the Communist movement made for his parents also, moreover, led Soman to remain loyal to the party longer. I interviewed him on two occasions, in 2005 and 2006, while visiting him at his home in Sachivothamapuram colony, famous for the Kurichi struggle that took place there that formed a landmark in the emergence of Kerala's indigenist movement (see chapter 3).

4.2.3   SOMAN: "IF YOU ARE GOOD AT CORRUPTION, YOU CAN GET ALONG WITH THE PARTY"

Soman at his home
Poster: Ayyankali

Soman was born in 1951 to a Pulaya, agricultural workers' family in the vicinity of Kottayam. His parents were landless, hardly making ends meet by working the fields of one of the large landlords in the area. It was a hard life and as a wave of mobilizations swept the region in the late 1950s, after the first Communist government had tried to enact laws granting landless workers the right to the land around their dwellings (the "*kudikidappu*" land), Soman's parents too joined the struggle. Eventually it yielded them a piece of land in Sachivothamapuram Colony. The family moved there in 1962 and Soman still lives in this very colony in a small two-room house, the front porch of which is now adorned by a large poster of Ayyankali, the early Pulaya anti-caste reformer. It was at the time of the struggle by his parents to receive a piece of land, when Soman was still only a child, that he first came into contact with the Communist party:

> "When I was a kid, I saw the police beat up my father, in front of my mom. There were many policemen. In revenge I joined the Communist party. I was not theoretically aware of things yet then. They took him to jail that day, and released him two days later.

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[74] George Kunnath's (2006) biographical analysis of a Communist Dalit in Bihar forms an interesting comparison to Soman's story.

> I had been sleeping close to my father, the day when the police came to catch him. He did nothing wrong, just participated in the struggle for land."

The police brutality had been traumatizing for Soman as a young kid, he says. Not only had his father been badly beaten up, the police had also destroyed the family's few belongings, leaving them with not even a pot to cook in, or anything to eat. In this context he still vividly remembers the support his family got from Communist party members when his father was jailed:

> "Those times no food was provided in the jail. So we were to take food to them. Ramachandra Pillai came here to carry the food for them. Those times nobody was ready to do that. That was the political situation that existed then. The communist party longed for a change. They visualized a nation like Russia, where nothing called inequality exists."

The early Communist leader A K Gopalan also "taught" Soman personally and made a strong impression:

> "If you worked with him you would understand, he never treated you as an inferior worker".

Looking back, Soman believes it was the way that Communist party members had supported his family in their distress that made him loyal to the party for so long. On the other hand, he also believes that Marxism as a theory strengthened his commitment:

> "There are many political parties in India but none of them analyzes issues as closely as the Marxist party does, especially the CPM [CPI(M)]. They would analyze all the political developments, all over India. ... Almost all of the big leaders taught me. There was one brilliant leader in the party, S Ramachandra Pillai. He was an amazing teacher. And none can surpass P V Govinda Pillai in his knowledge. No other party has such brilliant leaders. A well-taught follower will never leave the party."

Theoretical clarity, Soman believes, is key to the survival of a political organization and its values. It is, moreover, something that in the earlier days of the Communist party, did not depend on formal education but on commitment and insight:

> "Even when there was a person like EMS in the party, it was K V Pathros who was the state secretary... and he only went to school up to fourth standard!".

In his early days in the Communist party, Soman was an enthusiastic pupil of Marxist thought and had enjoyed analyzing different social questions from a class perspective. This enthusiasm started to wane, however, when he saw other Communist leaders practicing something very different from their words:

> "I used to see things in class terms. But around 1990 the middle class started to infiltrate into the party. And then we lost our voice. We held on to the party believing in the ideology. But in fact with such a preposition the party was working against the SC and the ST. Because we were not supposed to spread communalism, we could not mobilize the Paraya and the Pulaya. And we followed those beliefs blindly. But the Ezhavas and the Nairs inside the party at the same time started getting organized on their own in terms of caste. But if we would try to do that, the party would punish us. A communist Ezhava can participate in the SNDP [the Ezhava reform organization]

programs. But we, Communist SCs or STs, werenot allowed to get involved in any other public meetings."

Other inconsistencies in Communist ideology and practice also started to bother Soman. Having always been taught that Congress was the party of capitalists and landlords and the main political enemy, responsible for the dissolution of the first Communist government of Kerala, he was stunned to see the Communist party trying to form an alliance with Congress at the federal level in 1996: "They became the protectors of Congress! This is not something that can go unnoticed…" With the demise of the Soviet Union, which Soman blames on the sustained campaign to this effect by the Americans, he had already noticed the Communist party was deviating from its commitment to the working class more and more:

> "We can say that nothing called a Communist Party really exists now. The Communist party has abandoned its slogan of the rule of the working class. Once itabandons that slogan, what is its relevance? I wonder what will be next…make some changes to the Manifesto?!"

With his disillusionment with the party, Soman came to see no real difference anymore between Congress and the CPI(M):

> "The [Communist] party flag is redder. But politically they have no difference of opinion with other parties. They just take a pose against some issues to make the poor feel the Communist party is still with its old values of uplifting the poor, the working class – but all they see when looking at us is a vote bank".

The main problem Soman identifies is that "the rich" – and upper-castes -- took over the party:

> "then its ruin started. There are many martyrs from our community, but nobody acknowledges them anymore. Their histories are excluded from the party's history".

The last straw for Soman in terms of his loyalty to the party was his experience as a CPI(M) member in the *panchayat* where he got caught in the way of the self-enriching ambitions of some other party members. There had been plans for the renovation of the municipality's stadium – a large project – for which an open call for applications was to be organized. His colleagues, however, played foul and came up with three applications, one of which from a person who turned out not to exist at all and the other belonging to the servant of the person they had set up to get the contract. When Soman found out about this and exposed the set-up, all hell broke loose and he himself was accused of corruption in retaliation. After the party, on his insistence, appointed a commission of enquiry and a report came from higher up, Soman was acquitted of the corruption allegations against him. After the whole experience, he had however become so bitter with the party that he decided to leave it:

> "I said I came to the party not longing for a *panchayat* membership, but longing for a change in society. And I said I couldn't cooperate with the party like this. And they tried to kill me. And then I quit the party. Those who are behind the corruption are rich now. And I, who pointed all this out, am still living in poverty. … So my point is if and only if

you are good at corruption, can you get along with the party. But I don't want to survive like that. The party is totally degrading."

Hence after 33 years as member of the Communist party, from age 14 onward, in 1998 Soman decided to leave the party. Many of the people from his colony had preceded him, others followed him:

"Here in this colony, almost all were with the party. Now few real supporters are there. Even Jayan's brother [the son of the man who committed suicide during the Kurichi struggle in protest against the then CPI(M)-led government – see chapter 3] used to be a party member. Now only seven families are left. Most are standing with the party only for benefits. Maybe they will get a piece of land, daughter needs a job...that way. It's not because of the party and its ideology [that they stand with it]".

Bitterly, Soman notes that whereas he joined the party as it had stood with his father, nobody from the party came to offer their condolences when his father died a few years back.

Soman still emphasizes that he has nothing against the party ideology. Yet in leaving the party and becoming involved in dalit-adivasi activism instead, he has started becoming more concerned with the need for dalits and adivasis to organize on their own:

"We have been voting for other parties for so long. Now, we thought, we should start voting for ourselves. So after many discussions, we formed the Rashtriya Maha Sabha [the political sister organization of the AGMS]."

Even from a Marxist perspective, he now believes it is essential for dalits and adivasis – whom he calls "nations" rather than castes - to organize "themselves":

"If we look at history, earlier there was much less of a gap between the SNDP [Ezhavas] and our community. But now see how big the gap has become. They are much more forward. Why has this happened? Once you start to closely examine the situation, a theory will emerge. The means of production are the key issue for any nation. Only when we own those means, can we have decision power."

At every turn, Soman encounters the Communist party proclaiming support for dalit-adivasi struggles, especially when these struggles have been defeated. Yet he is now no longer convinced about the genuineness of the support. After Muthanga, for instance, the then CPI(M) opposition leader Achutanandan condemned the violence and a party congress decided on the need to grant land to landless adivasis. Yet the crucial issue that could have made a difference for the AGMS –the retraction of the large number of court cases that was financially and morally crippling the AGMS in the years after Muthanga – the CPI(M) never brought up:

"Why did they not pass the resolution to withdraw the cases? And when Muthanga happened, Achutanandan made a statement saying it was organized by the People's War Group [a Naxal faction]. Why was he doing that? The intention behind their deeds are clearly to shatter this community. Only when the Parayan and the Pulayan become aware of these hidden gimmicks, can we say we are politically conscious. For that we need to organize ourselves theoretically. We need to understand the ruling class has only one agenda, that is to demolish this group."

As part of this vision, Soman emphasizes the commonality of dalits and adivasis and the need for them to stand together despite government attempts to isolate them by giving the one land, and not the other.

> "See the imperial powers wanted to wipe out the SCs and STs [synonymous for dalits and adivasis] who were once the owners of this land. Subsequent governments in India, following the path of these imperial powers, have also marginalized them. It is not easy to organize these people but it is the only way forward".

<div align="center">***********</div>

There is a type of biographical trajectory that is relevant to understand the shift from Communism to indigenism that I have not yet discussed in this section, which is that of adivasis and dalits who joined Naxal groupings in the 90s and 2000s. There are a number of new Naxalite splinter groups (each of probably no more than about 20 people) such as Porrotam (Struggle), the Adivasi Vimochana Samithi (the Adivasi Liberation Front), and the CPI(ML)-Red Flag, which function in Kerala today and occupy a small place in the political scene. The reason I cannot give detailed biographical accounts of activists in these groupings is however that since they are followed and sometimes even wanted by the police, establishing contact with them was much more difficult. Usually I could only speak with them for about half an hour before they felt it was no longer safe for them to stay around and for obvious reasons they were usually reluctant to share personal information or open up – often presenting me with rather wooden ideological statements instead. The stories of these contemporary dalit and adivasi Naxals showed great similarities to those of Janu, Geethanandan and Soman, except for the fact that they had come to see the CPI(M) commitment to parliamentary democracy and the constitution as the main problem and saw the AGMS as complicit in this as it was searching for agreements with the government.

A Cheruma (dalit) woman whom I will call Thankamma, a leading activist in the Adivasi Samara Sangam – a branch of Porrotam – told me

> "We do not believe in the parliamentary system. We are convinced that following the constitution, there can be no radical changes. The governments in power have made sure that by following the constitution nothing is possible in terms of changing the existing social set-up. We strongly disagree with the Gothra Sabha's decision to work shoulder to shoulder with the constitution. Our ideology is that of Marxism, Leninism and Maoism".

The CPI(M)'s Adivasi Kshema Samithi, likewise, in Thankamma's view worked

> "hand in hand with the parliamentary system. It will not be able to liberate the proletariat. Even after 50 years of independence, all these problems still exist. We look forward to a revolution that brings a sea change in society. We want the hegemony of proletarians."

She herself had become part of Porrotam only after breaking with the CPI(M), which in the late 90s had sent her to Wayanad to organize adivasis there under CPI(M) leadership. In 2000 she left the party for what she claims were "ideological reasons". Soon enough, clashes with former CPI(M) colleagues then became violent – twice they reported her to the police: one time after Porrotam had attacked a mobile food distribution unit (a "Mobile Maveli Store" of the Kerala State Civil Supplies Corporation) to distribute the food amongst starving people; the other time after Porrotam besieged a local bank office and destroyed the documents it used to reclaim farmers' loans.

In stark contrast to AGMS activists and sympathizers, the contemporary Naxalites I interviewed would hardly mention issues of caste, identity, or culture and indeed generally get rather uncomfortable with questions along these lines. Thankamma, when I asked her about why Porrotam founded the Adivasi Samara Sangam, was quick to wave the question away saying

> "Because adivasis are a part of the proletarian struggle – adivasis, dalits, farmers, women, we are all the same, our party does not discriminate amongst human beings".

When the Naxalites I interviewed did touch on something close to the notion of adivasi identity, they usually did so entirely along hegemonic lines, with no political re-interpretaiton. Arruvikal Krishnan[75], the Paniya leader of the Adivasi Vimoshana Samithi, merely told me when I asked him what it meant to him to be part of the class struggle as an adivasi:

> "Adivasis? There are 35 different tribal groups, with different customs and traditions, I cannot remember all of them but there is a list…".

Being forced to operate underground, being in a very fragmented state, and moreover holding to highly abstract ideological "teachings", there seems to be little ideological innovation going on amongst these Naxal groups. Instead they "articulate" their frustration and disillusionment with the Communist party primarily through (illegal) action. Activists like Vasu, Geethanandan, Janu, and Soman however are not just ideologically-driven activists but also organic intellectuals who need to articulate their disagreement with the Communist party in terms of a new vision. Their ideas become debated in Kerala at large and help mobilize greater alliance and support. The difference in vision – the fact that AGMS activists have developed an indigenist vision that clearly, not just practically but also ideologically, distinguishes it from the Communist party and processes "past mistakes" ideologically – probably explains the greater popularity of the AGMS, although the Naxalites' militant action-centered approach and consequent illegalization by the state of course also explain why they could not propagate nor develop their theoretical visions further.

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[75] Who days after my interview with him was contacted by a journalist and convinced to stage an attack on me (see appendix).

4.3   CONCLUSION

Without enquiring into the biographical trajectories of the activists presented here, one could easily arrive at stories merely confirming the idea that the need to organize on the basis of indigenism was always already evident, merely waiting for persons with the right determination to take it forward. One could then read in Janu's encounter with Solidarity, Geethanandan's encounter with Ambedkar's thought, or Soman's encounter with the AGMS itself the trigger that set of the process of indigenist engagement of these activists, with the wider political environment of emergent indigenous movements nationally and internationally as the favorable conditions under which such engagement was possible. Yet even by interviewing them in the present – with their memories transformed to some extent by their current experiences – an enquiry into their previous political engagements, before they became convinced of indigenism, reveals the strong commitment all had to Communism. For none of these activists, moreover, was the turn away from Communism one triggered by the positives of indigenism, which is logical since, as we saw in part 2 of this dissertation, adivasi identity is in fact a highly complex and difficult notion to build an emergent counter-hegemonic politics on. What pushed activists to nevertheless leave the party – all except Kalan who in his old age could choose to stand somewhat aloof of the everyday politics of the party and of general political debates – were the negative experiences they themselves had within the party or other Communist groupings. Though some of the activists place more emphasis on ideology while others stress practice, their biographies all (except Kalan) show a combination of practical and ideological reasons to turn away from Communism and towards indigenism.

Unlike Ramachandran Guha, who argues that despite a "bankrupt" Stalinist ideology, Communist leaders like EMS Namboodiripad, Kerala's first Chief Minister and long-time General Secretary of the later CPI(M), retained their popularity because of their "meaningful" Gandhian practice (2003: 212), the biographies I present here show encounters with a Communist movement that is both ideologically *and* practically increasingly in crisis. In fact, contrary to Guha's perception, the biographical narratives given here show that it was Communist leaders' corruption rather than their ideological dogmatism that usually became the first trigger for activists to look for alternatives. The way different activists responded to a crisis of their erstwhile hopes as part of Communist groupings – and the extent to which they rejected Communism altogether - depended on the timing and the nature of their involvement with Communism: the Communist party C K Janu encountered was already a very different one from the one Vasu had joined in his youth, as it was when Soman joined it as a kid. Rejection of the party hence was easier for Janu than for those who had experienced the party in the days when

it still represented a force that was leading unprecedented changes in the lives of the working class. Likewise, it took Geethanandan longer to reject Communism than it did Janu since he had been part of a more dynamic and radical Communist grouping that was affected by the same kind of ideological dilemmas the mainstream CPI(M) was going through, yet was less directly part of practically compromising with the status quo of neoliberal governance.

The story that emerges from the biographical trajectories I discussed here is hence rather different from the picture usually emerging from studies that focus only on the interaction of indigenous people and the state and do not ask what happened to the alternative venues, other than indigenist organization, through which many indigenous people were already articulating and resisting their oppression earlier. The Communist party figures large in every single of these biographies, as it did in all the life histories I collected of other activists. A major reason for the rise of indigenism in Kerala is located hence in the declining appeal of the Communist party that, once having decided to stand for elections and effect changes through periodically being in charge of the government, became increasingly torn between its ideological raison d'etre of leading the class struggle on behalf of the working class and its practical need to compromise on this in order to manage its hold on power.

It was not just, however, a question of a declining appeal of the Communist party: more than that, what started out as efforts to reinvigorate the kind of class struggles that the Communist party had originally stood for, radicalized into mutual hostility between the Communist party and the new movements, eventually also finding its expression in ideological polarization between Communism and indigenism, Marxist "ideology" and indigenous "culture", "class" and "caste", "human beings" and "identity". In the next chapter, I will take a closer look at this polarizing dynamics that propelled the AGMS to not just critique the Communist party, but frame itself in almost diametrically opposite terms.

CHAPTER 5

WIDENING CIRCLES OF POLITICAL DIS-IDENTIFICATION

Whereas the activist biographies, in combination with widerpolitical trends,that I discussed in the previous chapter show a strong inclinationfor a shift from "class"-centered to "identity"-focused politics, the life histories also left a lot of spaces of ambiguity between Communism and indigenism. The dynamics discussed in this chapter, however, show how conflict and competition between the two political blocks increasingly hardened to position the two in stark contrast to each other. I look in more detail here at how once a new challenge in the form of indigenism emerged, its interaction with the Communist party took on a dynamics of its own and magnified the ideological polarization between the two. As we will see, the political split even took on certain ethnicized characteristics. Ethnicization has not reached the point where the split is generally interpreted as an ethnic rather than political one, though aspects of this can be seen for instance in C K Janu's claim that she is not engaged in a "political" struggle but a "cultural" one: of adivasi-dalit culture versus mainstream culture. As we will see, both political blocks have developed radically different interpretations of history, bordering on different "myths of origin". Both groups moreover tend to see each other in diametrically opposed terms. From the side of the AGMS, the Communist party increasingly comes to stand in for "upper-castes" or "Savarnas" (or "caste Hindus") while dalits and adivasis – broadly defined (often including Izhavas) – come to be seen as the original "black" race. From the side of the Communist party, a subtler ethnicization is taking place in how particular notions have acquired an implicit – naturalized – caste connotation. Communist leaders for instance are assumed to be upper-castes "uplifting" their lower-caste brothers and exhibiting the typical *habitus* of upper-caste men: sober and "self-sacrificing" (Devika 2010).[76]

It is then perhaps not surprising that notions developed to study ethnic conflict also appear relevant to analyzing the political dynamics of polarization between Communists and indigenists in Kerala. Indeed, Abram de Swaan's (1997) description of "widening circles of disidentification" captures some key processes developing between the two groups in Kerala. As de Swaan emphasizes, "identification and disindentification are not each other's opposites"

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[76] Projit Mukherji (2009: 93) even argues that "Marxism ..in [West] Bengal is no longer a matter of revolutionary praxis .. it has instead become a matter of ethnic identity". One can, Mukherji argues, in these contexts apparently simply *be* a Bengali Marxist" as a matter of pride – one need not demonstrate this Marxism by acting in a certain way.

(1997: 105). Rather, disidentification is much more virulent where two groups are intimately related and sometimes blur into each other – as between Communist and indigenist activists in Kerala. Identification and disidentification in this sense are "two sides of an emotional triangle, with at its base ignorance and indifference" (ibid.).Identification depends not only on constructing a positive in-group but all the more on constructing a negative self, opposite to the "other" who becomes the target on which to project the self-serving inclinations that are denied to the self. As we will see in this chapter, it is well possible to capture the rift developing between the Communist party and the AGMS in terms of such "widening circles of disidentification".

5.1   (RE)READING KERALA HISTORY BETWEEN COMMUNISM AND CASTE

The past is always a prime battlefield in present politics and its visions of the future. The interpretation of the political history of Kerala and in particular the question of the relationship between the caste reform movements of the early twentieth century – with which the AGMS identifies - and the early Communist party has hence become a key node around which circles of disidentification have been widening. Both groups haveby now developed radically different version of this history. The Communist party claims to have radicalized the earlier "social reform movements"and broadened their struggle to reform negative traditional customs towards a program of structural social transformation. Indigenist activists argue to the contrary that the rise of the Communist movement took over the momentum ofthe "anti-caste" movements and replaced them with an upper-caste dominated project, avoiding radical reform. It is interesting to look more closely at these readings, not to arbitrate over the truth-value of their claims on the past but to show how the indigenist form of contemporary political mobilizations in Kerala is indeed not so much about the fit of notions of indigeneity to political needs but more about explicit opposition to the Communist party. The polarizing "dialogue" (or more perhaps reactionary monologues) on Kerala's recent past that I present here is compiled from different partisan sources: my interviews with Communist party members and indigenist activists as well as official publications by the Communist party and published writings by indigenist activists.

Apart from specific historical questions and topics, the main polarization however starts already with the question of how to approach history in general. The writings of EMS Namboodiripad, which continue to be the main source cited in Communist party documents and by members of the Communist party and the CPI(M)'s official website, emphasize a "scientific" reading of

history: seeing things of the past not as moral issues but as signs of a particular social organization. In this light, caste is a question of "backwardness", a sign of the feudal relationships that need to be overcome and will be overcome in the rational progression of history. EMS described the progression of social and family institutions from ancient, Dravidian to feudal society not, he claimed, to make an argument about the "superiority" or not of so-called pre-Aryan society – i.e., society before the supposed advent of Brahmins from the North – but simply to "scientifically" describe the course of history. EMS claimed to admire EVR, Tamil Nadu's radical Dravidian thinker, yet argued that, "Dravidian superiority is as unscientific as the theory of Aryan superiority" (EMS in Panikkar 1998). Failing to give an analytical reading of history, EMS argued, would only serve to bolster vested interests.

Indigenists activists I spoke to by contrast argued that the crux of the problem with the Communist party's view of history lay precisely with its supposed "scientific" class-based analysis. This allowed it to disguise as a neutral, "analytical" exercise what was in fact an attempt to recover a role for the Brahmins as the primary movers in the history. Such "scientific" reading ignored the achievements of the more egalitarian Dravidian society and excused its violent subjugation to caste hierarchy: it presented what was a cruel turn in history as an inevitable and progressive development, in turn justifying the higher-caste leadership of a proletarian movement. The problem, dalit activists often told me, was that EMS was trying to do everything to prevent the radical anti-Brahminism that was spreading in Tamil Nadu at the time to reach Kerala: EMS was in fierce competition with the Dravidian leader EVR, and used a Communist interpretation of history precisely to be able to avoid EVR's standpoint that Brahminism was what ruined South India. The right way to interpret history according to indigenist activists was reading it through a caste lens: how caste hierarchy was imposed, which groups benefitted from it, and how these same groups were now trying their best to find ways of avoiding to talk about caste except as some historical moment in the linear advancement of history towards Communism.

5.1.1 *Early reform movements: Sanskritization or radical egalitarianism?*

Communist party documents tend to call the caste-based movements of the early twentieth century (before Indian independence and the "unification" of Travancore, Cochin, and Malabar) "social reform movements" and it is well-known that EMS was involved in one of these himself: the Yogakshema Sabha, an organization he founded to try and introduce reforms to his own Namboodiri caste, the very highest caste in Malabar. EMS wanted to promote reform in the kinship arrangements of his caste – particularly in the traditional practice that only the eldest

son of a family would marry while younger sons had informal marriages with Nair women and a majority of Namboodiri women remained unmarried and in purdah[77] (total seclusion). He moreover wanted to awaken a positive attitude towards modern education and abolish some of negative traditional practices, above all the practice of untouchability vis-à-vis other castes. In this, EMS claimed inspiration from the SNDP, the Izhava reform movement, and is widely acclaimed by Communists to have consistently lived according to his convictions, for instance no longer wearing the "sacred" thread and inter-dining with people of other castes without any reluctance (Namboodiripad 1976: 2 ff). In his own words, EMS wanted to "change Namboodiris into human beings" (in Panikkar 1998). Other "social reform movements" played a similarly important role in, as the CPI(M) website puts it, fighting against "superstition and bad customs", "casteism", and "untouchability". They were important in "awakening an interest in acquiring modern education", initially introduced by Christian missionaries and thereafter, under pressure from the people, provided by the government. The official history of the party (CPI (M) website 2009) singles out Sree Narayana Guru (of the SNDP), Ayyankali, and Vagbhatananda (a follower of Sree Narayana Guru in Malabar) for praise but all the more so Ramakrishna Pillai (editor of the newspaper *Swadeshabimani* in Travancore and the first to, in 1912, write the biography of Marx in Malayalam) and P. Kesavadev (who introduced the "social renaissance movements" to "ideas of socialism and Soviet Revolution"). Especially noted by many Communists is the atheist Sahodharan Ayyappan, who suggested Sri Narayanan's slogan of "one *jati*, one religion, one God for man" ought to be replaced by the motto "no caste, no religion, no God!", and argued that the real moral strength of a community lay not in defying caste distinctions vis-à-vis upper castes but in ending untouchability towards dalits[78]. Even EVR, the great Tami anti-caste ideologue, a Communist party member told me, was inspired by Communism and published a version of the Communist Manifesto[79]. The Communist version of this history hence claims that the more revolutionary actors in the social reform movements drifted towards Communism as the reform movements, which had initially helped promote a form of public consciousness, in the course of their existence became locked within their respective castes. As a Communist party member told me,

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[77] Purdah, the concealing of women from men and indeed from all public life, exists in various forms both in Muslim and Hindu communities in India. Namboodiri women did not use a *burkha* but a large palm leaf umbrella to shield their face and generally remained within the walls of the family home (Saradamoni 1980: 129). As an Izhava friend married to a Namboodiri woman would joke "These Namboodiri women, for centuries they've been used to receiving news only through gossip amongst themselves....still all they can do is gossip!".

[78] Saradamoni (1980: 146 ff.) and Mohan (2008) describe and analyze Ayyappan's struggles in more detail.

[79] Mathew Baxter (2009) has done a fascinating study of how EVR vernacularized concepts from the Manifesto in his translation.

"these organization were aiming to encourage Sanskritizing behavior amongst their followers, fighting for temple entry like at Vaikom [80]. They were not interested to address the structural issues".

Indigenist activists, however, have a very different view on the nature of the early reform movements. Rather than lump these movements together as "social reform movements", they emphasize that the main issue was caste and that the upper-caste organizations like EMS's Yogakshema Sabha in the 1920s, but also for instance the powerful Nair Service Society (founded in 1914)[81], emerged not so much from the desire for reform but in order to ensure the dominance of these respective castes during a time of radical social change: it was a preparation that allowed them to convert their excessive wealth in land into investments in education and thereby access to the new, salaried sources of wealth when the time came that the descendants of the original Dravidian people – now the lower castes and outcastes – started demanding land. On the other side of the caste spectrum, however, there was Ayyankali's *anti-caste* movement, which was already active in the last years of the nineteenth century and went much further in confronting the caste structure than the Communist movement did. For the party caste was only a problem in so far as it prevented workers from uniting but otherwise not an issue to be fought against. As Sunny, a dalit activist involved in the AGMS, told me:

"this rigid distinction between base and superstructure allowed Communist leaders to condemn any action that focused on caste discrimination as a distraction from the 'real' issues."

According to him, the strength of an anti-caste leader like Ayyankali lie precisely in his ability to combine livelihood issues with issues of "human dignity". Ayyankali fought against the prohibition of lower-castes to enter particular public spaces so that by 1900 Pulayas had the right to walk on the public roads in most areas of Travancore[82]; but also, with the founding in 1905 of the Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangham (Association for the Welfare of the Poor), Ayyankali successfully pushed for the enforcement of a six day working week for agricultural laborers[83]; and he fought for lower-caste women to be allowed to wear upper garments and go without the bead necklace that symbolized their slave past - the successful "Kallumala"/bead necklace

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[80] The Vaikom Satyagraha took place in 1924-25 and was in fact not a temple-entry movement, but a movement – led by Congress – to establish the right of untouchable lower castes to use the public roads around the Vaikom temple. The struggle gained attention particularly for Gandhi's involvement in the struggle. As a fascinating collection of documents of the time (Government of Kerala 2006) shows, Gandhi used the occasion primarily to promote his non-violent, non-"impatient" approach to confronting Hindu orthodoxy.

[81] By the 1920s, the NSS owned over 100 acres of land and school buildings and equipment worth over 200.000 rupees (Jeffrey 1992: 104).

[82] Earlier they had to use special roads or jump off the road and make themselves invisible if someone from a higher caste would come on the horizon. In the movie *Elippathayam* by Adoor Gopalakrishnan, many such practices are powerfully dramatized.

[83] These struggles are documented in detail in Saradamoni (1980: 146ff.)

agitation of 1915-16[84]. Ayyankali's actions and words, Sunny claims, emerged organically from the lives of dalits at the time and mobilized them for radical egalitarian visions. It was precisely this momentum that worried upper-caste leaders and prompted them to intervene. As Sunny argues,

> "Not a single man from Ayyankali's movement we find back in the Communist party leadership. What is the meaning of it? It means the 'politicization' of Kerala society de-politicized this section [dalits and adivasis]."

5.1.2 THE PARTY: RADICALIZING OR IMPEDING THE ANTI-CASTE MOMENTUM?

The Communist party sees itself as having grown organically from the earlier people's movements – both from the "social reform movements" in Travancore and Cochin and, crucially, from the early peasant movements, mostly in Malabar. In both cases, it claims a radicalizing sequence between these movements and early Communism, whose leaders "propagated a new idea of giving shape to a new man... formed out of life and experience: a new style which touched the heart of ordinary people" (CPI(M) website 2009). Communist leaders usually have no qualms admitting that in the beginning, they adopted socialist aims without knowing anything much about socialist theory. Communism was, as comrade Krishna Pillai is often quoted, simply seen as the vision that "the whole world belongs to one caste, the human caste". Early social reform movements like the SNDP in the course of the 1920s are claimed to have gradually developed into labor unions – a common example being the first Travancore Labor Association set up in 1922 under the guidance of a new socialist vision popular with "the oppressed masses". Many ordinary Communist sympathizers moreover express their gratefulness for how Communist leaders helped break all kinds of caste taboos. They came into people's houses, calling themselves "comrades", and sharing food with workers -- "The Communist leaders did so many things to make people overcome the old caste feelings!", a Pulaya Communist told me. Indeed according to them it was the Communists who truly lived Gandhi's ideals of "sincerity and simplicity". The party moreover, as evidence of its "anti-casteist", claims to have a much higher number of lower-caste leaders and Member of the

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[84] Caste-determined dress codes and other everyday rules used to be extreme in Kerala in the nineteenth century. There used to, for instance, be a "polluting distance" for every caste and strict rules on what ornaments particular castes could or could not wear. Even language was caste differentiated and lower-castes were forced to use self-debasing words. Names given to dwellings of people from different castes for instance differed (e.g. *chala* for dalits, *illam* for Namboodiris) – a Pulaya, when in front of a higher caste person, had to refer to his own dwelling as a "dung-heap" (Saradamoni 1980: 33f.).

Legislative Assembly than other parties[85]. And, as Communists like to point out, it was the only party ideologically committed to maintaining a "genuinely secular stand" including an "uncompromising struggle against caste oppression" that "disassociated itself completely from caste and communal separatism" (Namboodiripad 1984: 3f).

Indigenist activists hold a radically different view on the relationship between the early anti-caste movements and the Communist party. They argue the latter arose precisely to impede the anti-caste momentum, limiting it safely to the symbolic level of inter-dining and dress codes. The argument is articulated powerfully by Arundhati Roy (1997) in her novel *The God of Small Things* in a passage speculating about the origins of Communism in Kerala*:*

> "The real secret was that communism crept into Kerala insidiously. As a reformist movement that never overtly questioned the traditional values of a caste-ridden, extremely traditional community. The Marxists worked from within the communal divides, never challenging them, never appearing not to. They offered a cocktail revolution. A heady mix of Eastern Marxism and orthodox Hinduism, spiked with a shot of democracy."[86]

Indeed, indigenists argue that Communists were always careful not to upset the key caste institution: endogamous marriage. Upper-caste Communist leaders were not prepared to marry outside of their caste: they would publicly present themselves as being against "casteism" and "untouchability" while at the same time retaining the fundamentals of caste practice in their personal lives.[87]From a caste perspective, the "sincerity and simplicity" of the Communist party was simply a reflection of anotherworldly Brahminical *habitus*. Read thus, the *sanyasi* style of early Communist leaders, which the Indian establishmentso laments contemporary Dalit leaders like Mayawati as lacking, is another indication of how the Communist leadership was almost automatically assumed to be upper-caste;

> "just look at their language, it's always about 'uplifting' the people, all about 'self-sacrifice'…what does it say? It says the Communist party per definition sees its leadership as being high caste",

an AGMS activist told me. Or as a RMS activist Manoj, at Kottayam University, said: "when the dalit speaks he is accused of copying the higher castes, of not being 'authentic' to his caste,

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[85] According to independent researcher Kumar (2009: 402) there's 40 percent more STs and SCs party members in the Communist party in Kerala than in Congress.

[86] Roy – who showed herself in strong solidarity with the AGMS after the Muthanga struggle (see her paper in the *Fronline* of March 15-28, 2003) – in her book goes on to call EMS "the flamboyant Brahmin high priest of Marxism in Kerala" faced with "the extraordinary– critics said absurd– position of having to govern a people and foment revolution simultaneously". Though one can see Roy is not altogether hostile to EMS or the Communist effort, Communists I spoke to in Kerala universally and passionately condemned her for saying such awful words on EMS. Most had not, it must also be noted, red her book since the Malayalam translation only came out as I am writing these words – February 3, 2011.

[87] Chakravarti (2003) works out a similar criticism from a feminist perspective.

'Sankritization' is the word invented in academia for this". The party was hence reproducing the typical caste division of labor between manual and intellectual work. As another AGMS activist pointed out to me:

> "Despite his theoretical mediocrity, a Brahmin like EMS was encouraged to become a visionary theoretician of the party but the scholastic efforts of Marxists born to a lower caste were sidelined.. Pathros, a Pulaya Christian who translated Marx's *Capital* into Malayalam, he was thrown out of the party to make way for these high-castes posing as great intellectuals. Just look at the leadership of the party: it's all Namboodiripads, Pillais...".

The abstract theories of Marxism and its air of authoritative intellectualism - "this Marxian Vedanta" as one activist called it (Joe 2010) –many activists hence see as an effort to disguise how Communism in Kerala was about preserving the existing caste hierarchies. As C K Janu argued, Communist ideology had re-enslaved adivasis and dalits: "they were changing into slaves of this ideology". Marxist ideology prevented people from seeing clearly how their oppressed position as former slaves was being produced by the very movement claiming to work for their emancipation.

The general difference of perspective on the role of the Communist party is particularly controversial when it comes to the history of the two key issues in the reproduction of relations of power in Kerala: education and land reform. The Kerala Land Reform Act and the Kerala Education Act and, both first introduced by the Communist government (in 1957 and 1958 respectively) and eventually, through a lot of struggle, implemented in the 1970s are probably the proudest achievements of the Communist party in Kerala (grandly celebrated by the party on their 50th anniversary in 2007). Yet they are also the two areas where indigenist activists voice their strongest criticism.

5.1.3 *EDUCATION FOR EMANCIPATION – OR LEARNING CASTE?*

The Communist party claims – and is often granted – as one of its key achievements the high level of education and the formal 100 percent literacy rate of Kerala (attained by the 1987 CPI(M) government under leadership of E K Nayanar; CPI(M) website 2009). The party does acknowledge earlier contributions: the Christian missionary schooling efforts and particularly the demands by "people suppressed so far as untouchables and weaker sections" for schooling, in conjunction with access to government employment which "imparted a new enthusiasm among the oppressed masses" (CPI(M) website 2009). But it was the Communist movement that

took up this desire of the people and turned it into a priority that every Malayalee would be able to enjoy equal education[88]. According to a Communist MLA I interviewed,

> "the Communist party deliberately and methodically invested in education, setting goals so popular with the electorate that even when the Communists lost power, new governments did not dare modify education policies."

In this vein, the CPI(M) website (2009) boasts of the "stellar achievements in … Mass Literacy and Education Development" that have become recognized the world over as corner stones of the Kerala Model. On top of this, the Communist movement claims to have taught people knowledge that would help in their emancipation. As an Izhava Communist claimed:

> "they were raising people's consciousness….or actually, more than that, they were providing a political awareness, political classes…that is the crucial thing."

To "develop political consciousness among the ranks", the Communist party organized and maintained village reading rooms and libraries (CPI(M) website 2009). The party moreover helped publish accessible scientific and political material, brought out weekly magazines like *Prabhatham* – later the name of a progressive arts and cultural forum – and a daily newspaper (*Deshabimani*). It also organized weeks-long "learning and training camps" in which hundreds of people would participate who then later, back in their villages, in turn educated others in evening schools. Malayalee classics such Kesava Dev's "*From the gutter*" (1942) or Thakazhi's "*Two measures of rice*"(1948) were all products of this movement. With regard to dalits and adivasis, AKS members I interviewed would persistently emphasize the importance of the Communist party in making education available to them. Babu, a Paniya AKS leader in Kannur told me:

> "In this country called India there are not many places where the adivasis and other backward people can sit, walk, eat, and get education with other people, with other communities. Kerala, West Bengal and Tripura [the three states in India where the Communist party has been in power regularly] are some of the only places. In other states there are still many practices to keep backward people away...but this is not the case in the states where Communists have the upper-hand. Here .. any tribal can get his children admitted to school. There is no hindrance for such a thing in the social situation of Kerala. This situation is an achievement and result of the works and efforts by the progressive movements – Communist party and workers' unions. The adivasis are people who are not yet up to 'that' level of progress. What the CPI(M) and the AKS have been doing is raising them up to that level"

Already in such formulations of Communist party members, one can however sense a certain (in Babu's case internalized) hierarchy that attaches to the question of education ("backward people", "'that' level of progress") and has not really been addressed by the party. Indigenist critics indeed see the educational question in quite a different light. They argue that early

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[88] For an insightful and detailed academic account of the history of literacy and politics in Kerala, with first-hand observations from the 1960s, see Gough (1968).

missionary efforts helped some dalits and adivasis muster the confidence and possibility to acquire education, but that it was above all Ayyankali's movement that cleared the way for their children to start going to school. The agitations he led in the 1910s for the right to education for dalits were, according to an AGMS activist,

> "the most revolutionary episode in the history of Kerala. When this village school refused to accept a Pulaya girl, Ayyankali took up the issue and organized a demonstration to assert our right to schooling. He took a brave stance and faced a lot of violence. A group of angry Nairs (upper-castes) set fire to the school -- just because an untouchable girl had dared to enter it.."[89].

Ayyankali moreover organized a large strike in which dalits – almost facing starvation before they won their victory – stood up to their landlords, again demanding education for their children. As a dalit activist from Idukki told me:

> "Theirs was not a polite request [like that of the Communist party], it was a struggle. Ayyankali told them, 'if you don't let our children go to school, we will turn your schools into fields'".

Indeed, indigenist activists see education not so much as a tool for "consciousness raising" but as a central question of caste itself. The dividing line of knowledge and ignorance, activists argued, is the *central* historical dividing line of higher and lower castes. It is moreover the key mechanism of caste as well. As Sunny, a dalit activist, explains,

> "caste is about being locked in one occupation. The Brahminical ideology will make sure an educated dalit will always be a contradiction, he will always be considered a field worker...and given education only to the extent necessary for such labor".

Hopes and promises were that the Communist movement would make knowledge available to all but indigenist activists see very little of that materialized. The story told by many activists instead is that while Communist leaders themselves were sending their children off to receive prime education, dalits and adivasis were suffering the caste prejudices and violence of upper-caste teachers and peers in Kerala's public schools. Many activists claim that schools and universities are the main site where dalits and adivasis experience casteism in its most pervasive forms, from subtle everyday caste remarks and exclusions (e.g., during the much celebrated free "mid-day meal"[90]) to violent "raggings" (bullying and torture by peers). Indigenist activists also have come to interpret the difficulty of dalit and adivasi students in getting a student loan as another (institutionalized) form of caste discrimination. Such discrimination easily leads dalit and adivasi children to "drop out" (a term that activists claim has a caste connotation) or to even commit suicide, as for instance in the famous case in 2004 of

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[89] See Saradamoni 1980: 148.

[90] This criticism is beautifully elaborated in *Twinkkle twinkle little caste*, a (2009) documentary by Soumya Vincent, about casteism in a nursery school in Kerala.

the 21-year old dalit student Rejani Anand who jumped from the seventh floor of the Office of the Entrance Commissioner at Trivandrum.[91] Indigenist activists claim that the Communist party, including through its youth wing, the Democratic Youth Federation of India that has a strong presence on campuses in Kerala, silently condones casteism in schools and colleges or even encourages it so it can maintain the status quo while pretending to make education universally available. The party, according to indigenist activists, has never made an effort to ensure the same quality education was given to dalits and adivasis as to upper-castes. As a dalit AGMS activist told me:

> "They always made sure that our children who got education from government schools would remain poor and ignorant. … . While other children were learning English, all our children were learning was how to remain agricultural laborers. And just look at all those 'Communists' sending their children to America for an education!".

On top of this, the "educated" character of Malayalee civil society seems – to indigenist activists – to have become a principal institution ensuring people do not think for themselves, hence perpetuating upper-caste dominance. Having experienced what they came to see as pointless political classes, many indigenist activists, particularly of the younger generation are thoroughly skeptical of "consciousness raising" in general. In C K Janu's words:

> "adivasis never give classes to others on what they are doing. But if others picked up a stone today, tomorrow they will explain in the news how they picked it up, write a book on it, propagate it, establish it as their own. Adivasis have done all things, but we don't go about lecturing on it."

5.1.4 *REDISTRIBUTING LAND OR SAFEGUARDING LANDED CAPITAL?*

The other major achievement, which the Communist party claims it is solely responsible for, are the "successful" land reforms in Kerala. While Communist party documents have become generous in praising "great social reformers", they also note that "these social reform movements… did not address the crucial issue of radical land reforms" (CPI(M) resolution February 22, 2006). It is a common story in Communist party networks that the most important reform the party (then still undivided) introduced was the package of land reforms laws: firstly, to make the eviction of tenant farmers from their land illegal; secondly, to award landless families ownership over their homestead plots (*kudikidappu* land); and thirdly, to set ceilings (of about 15 acres) to landholdings and to redistribute the surplus land amongst the landless. The first two aims were a tremendous success and have made Kerala, Communists claim, into the Indian state where by far the most radical land reform happened. The third component – the

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[91] Her case is analyzed from a dalit perspective in "On suicides, caste and higher education" by K. P. Girija in *Insight: A dalit youth magazine*.

distribution of surplus land above a certain ceiling – was less successful because a huge landlord-led and American-backed so-called "liberation movement" emerged against Kerala's first Communist ministry, leading to its dismissal by the federal government in 1959. The implementation of the land reform act was slowed down considerably and moreover muddled by subsequent Congress governments. But still the persistent struggles of the Communist party to implement the reforms led to significant successes. As an AKS member declared:

> "It was the Communist party that took the stand that land should be given to landless workers and peasants. It was the Communist party that first turned ownership of land by the peasants into a reality, at the time of the EMS government, in 1957. ... it was during EMS' government that the slogan was raised 'land to those who work it'. It was the Communist government that distributed the land to the peasants in India for the first time. The Communist party confiscated land from the feudal landlords and distributed it to the peasants and the landless so they had land to love and work and so the landlords were also left with some land for their livelihood. In a country like India where we are bound by a parliamentary and capitalist system, it was a great achievement on the part of the Communist government".

As the CPI(M) website puts it,

> "it was the Communist Party which raised people of Kerala who were suffocating under the iron grip of landlordism to the pedestal of democratic consciousness".

By providing security against eviction to erstwhile tenant farmers and dependent workers, some Communists also claim it laid the necessary basis for these groups to be able to effectively oppose casteist practices and confront the traditional social order.

Indigenists' reading of the historical land question in Kerala diverges strongly from that of the Communist party. As an activist told me,

> "They [Communists] did not manage to do anything for the downtrodden dalits and adivasis. It's the ninth time now that the Communists are going to be in power but they haven't solved even the land issue!"

The "tenant" reform, they claim, was even detrimental to many adivasis as settlers who had informally taken land from them now claimed to be "tenants" and dubbed the adivasis "landlords", thus legalizing land-grabbing. For landless dalits and adivasis on the other hand land reform meant very little – many of them got to own the small piece of land on which their huts stood, a progressive measure no doubt, but it was always made sure they would not come to possess any land that they could use to cultivate and make a steady living from like the rest of society. The whole failure of the measure to redistribute land above a certain ceiling is moreover attributed to Communist party leaders themselves by most indigenist activists. As Boban, a Pulaya activist, told me:

> "They [dalits and adivasis] fought against feudal values, but the party leader was the feudal lord. They initiated agricultural strikes. 'The land you work shall be yours', was their slogan. But the party leaders diverted the strikes as they belonged to feudal

families themselves. In 1945 EMS organized a meeting of Brahmins in Pallakad at Oomaloor. In that Yogyashema Sabha meeting he advised the Brahmins to sell their land off and deposit the money in banks – otherwise, EMS told them, workers and labor unions would snatch their land and the Brahmins would become landless people. And for that purpose he himself established a bank called the Dhanlakshmi Bank. Earlier it was Dhanlakshmi Trust, now it's a bank with a nation-wide presence. He came into power in 1957, and he has foreseen things much earlier and has saved his community. The Brahmins escaped to the town and started businesses and now they are governing the major temples. And they lost nothing".

Apart from converting their landed wealth painlessly into educational and business capital, indigenist activists claim many party leaders moreover warned their relatives to register the family property in separate individual names so that in the end it seemed no family owned above the land ceiling. As Bobin continues:

> "EMS was always playing it very intelligently, to keep his own community safe. And *he* was General Secretary of the party, till he died he was Chief Minister of Kerala twice. And *that* person posed as the savior of the working class?!".

For many indigenist activists, betrayal by the party on the land question moreover lies in the sacrifices made by dalits and adivasis in the struggle, which are largely ignored by the party. The struggle at Punnapra-Vayalar in 1946, which is remembered in Communist circles as part of the Independence struggle and a democratic insurgency against the dewan of Travancore's attempt to introduce authoritarian constitutional reforms, is an important point of contention in this regard ("A war over history", P. Venugopal called it in the *Indian Express,* Nov 28 1997). According to indigenist activists, it was actually a struggle by dalits to prevent their eviction and contest the economic hardship imposed by the upper-caste (mostly Nair and Syrian Christian) landlords in the area (see Ayrookuzhiel 1990). The higher caste Communist party leaders, they say, took it up and fitted it into the struggle for Independence and "responsible government" but never acknowledged the dalits who lost their life in the struggle. An activist in the RMS told me,

> "in 1957 the Left came to power through the Punnapra and Vayalar strikes. But their very first move was to chain the working class. More than five thousand SCs and STs had died at Punnapra and Vayalar!".

In reference to the struggle for Independence he added,

> "It is hard to be proud of this Kerala that has excluded dalits and adivasi for so long....".

Drawing lessons from this history, most indigenist activists I spoke to agreed that it made no sense for dalits and adivasis to fight in one front with others: after bearing most of the sacrifices for the struggle, they received at most a few cents of waste land. In fact, they argue, it is only with the rise of the AGMS and the break-through at Muthanga that the real struggle for land by all those excluded from Kerala's much-vaunted land reforms has started. As a joint statement by a number of dalit and adivasi activists in Kerala in 2007 read,

> "Kerala was a land of unknown land struggles till the historic land agreement in 2001 October was signed between the protestingDalits and Adivasis of Kerala and the State government. Since then dalit and adivasi land struggles in Kerala attained a new order."

The indigenist reading of early twentieth-century activism in Kerala, in sum, is almost the opposite of the Communist story on all major questions – on what the nature of early reform movements was, on what the Communist role was vis-à-vis these movements, on where Kerala's famously high literacy rates come from and what the educational program of the Communist party meant in this, and finally on the nature of land reforms and the land struggle in Kerala. In all this, the Communist party equates itself with the "Kerala model" of development, while indigenist activists have come to see the Kerala model as either subtly or even rather obviously serving to sustain upper-caste privilege at the expense of dalits and adivasis. And just as Communist party members continue to mobilize and draw from academic networks behind a defense of the Kerala model (e.g. UN 1975; Dreze and Sen 1997; Heller 2005; Franke and Chasin 2000; Kjosavik 2004), indigenists have been encouraged in their reading by various scholars as well: Chandra Bahn Prasad, who argues that "EMS's Kerala model lags far behind the Congress model of Development" when it comes to dalits and adivasis (1998:33); Gail Omvedt (2006) who claims that in terms of caste Kerala is simply "part of India"; Chatukalam and John who argue that "tribals have been largely left out of the gains of the vaunted Kerala model of development" (2006: 182); or Sreekumar and Parayil according to whom "state projects for the benefit of 'larger' society did not cover Adivasis" and instead often displaced and dispossessed them while "programs intended exclusively for their benefit only marginalised and deprived them further" (2006: 231). But though it has gotten a lot of academic support from critical academics, the indigenist discourse is also constantly in danger of being mobilized by reactionary academic forces: the most notable example being how the American Enterprise Institute has recently twisted themes of the critique of the Kerala model by indigenist activists to argue the classic neoliberal dogma against government intervention in the market and "put the Kerala model to rest" (Shah 2010). Yet since in their everyday political interaction, Communist and indigenist activists are each other's most intimate Other, they tend to become more concerned with their differences on the reading of Kerala history than with defending theprogressive commonalities of their interpretations. In the following section I will take a closer look at these polarizing political dynamics in the present out of which these dichotomous views on Kerala's past have arisen – and to which they contribute.

5.2   REVEALING THE "REAL" OTHER: THE POLITICS OF POLARIZATION

The different reading of the past that indigenist and Communist activists uphold should be seen in the context of their interaction in the course of the 1990s and 2000s where at almost every major turning point in the AGMS' rise it found itself confronted with the CPI(M). Already during the 1992 Sangamam, the CPI(M), following the CPI(ML), was amongst the first to argue that the initiative was "foreign funded" and had "unpatriotic" aims (see chapter 3).While the United Democratic Front, led by Congress, was in power from 1991 to 1996, contention between the emerging movement and the government took place without much mutual defaming, when in 1996 the Left Democratic Front, led by the CPI(M), came to power, very soon the confrontation between the movement and the government again took a more vicious turn, full of mutual defamatory accusations. Towards the end of the Left Democratic Front term in May 2001, the CPI(M) had clashed with indigenist activist on two more major occasions: both at Kurichi and at Kundalla. At Kurichi, the LDF[92] government was seen supporting the contractor against the colony's inhabitants – another proof to many activists that Communists were only interested in companies. At Kundalla, the Education Minister in charge of the engineering college was the head of Kerala Congress (J), a regional party that had split off from Kerala Congress and joined the CPI(M)-led Left Democratic Front. The conflict again became primarily an indigenist versus Communist one since it were CPI cadres and activists of its trade union wing, AITUC, that actively supported the *goondas* connected to the Tata estates who came to attack the activists.The consequent reaction of the LDF government to condemn the activists rather than their attackers (who were not even politically in the LDF coalition) – and spread rumors of how the tribals in question were manipulated by "outsiders" -- only confirmed indigenist activists' opinion ofthe "Left".

This stands in contrast to developments after the Congress-led UDF had taken over in May 2001 and indigenist activists for the first time were officially invited to talk to the government and reach an agreement. The impact of this symbolic gesture by A K Anthony, the then Congress Chief Minister of Kerala, was profound – so profound that despite the fact that it was this same UDF government that ordered the Muthanga police attack and despite the historical antagonism between Congress and most dalit and adivasi communities, many indigenist activists I spoke to in 2005-2007 still preferred to deal with Congress than with the Left. In 2006 AGMS activists

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[92] Two major coalitions emerged in Kerala following the lifting of the Emergency (in 1977), which continue till today. One is the Left Democratic Front (LDF) led by the CPI(M) and inclusive of the CPI, a few other small parties including Congress (S), a breakaway group iof the Indian National Congress. The other, the United Democratic Front (UDF) is led by the Indian National Congrss and is inclusive of all regional parties.

decided to form the Rashtriya Maha Sabha as a political branch of the movement that would possibly give activists a voice in the Legislative Assembly and moreover could strike where it hurt vested interests most: the electoral arena. On her decision to subsequently side with the UDF rather than the LDF during the 2006 municipal elections Janu told me,

> "It is true that they [Congress] took a stand against the Muthanga strike. But they were willing to hold discussions with us on the adivasi land issue, despite that attitude toward the Muthanga strike. Indeed we did conduct lots of strikes. But as a government they came forward for discussions, and made an agreement. The Left was never willing to do that".

In an interview in 2005, Janu had made a similar point:

> "The government, be it left or right, they deal with things under the same political agenda. Now the right is in power and the next time when the left comes into power they will do the rest of what the right government has started. They will not make a separate agenda and work for it. One important thing that happened in the history of Kerala is that for the first time the Congress government accepted the adivasis.None has done that hitherto. They accepted adivasis, held a discussion sitting with them around one table, made an agreement and maintained that agreement.. to some extend."

The sentiment was echoed by many, including for instance Mammen, for a while the vice-secretary of the AGMS, who argued

> "If one can expect anything it is from the UDF government. It was they who were ready to discuss things when the tribal people protested – they were ready for an agreement.[93]"

Indigenist activists generally even see the Communist party behind Muthanga, claimingthe forest officials who had fomented the initial unrest and gotten themselves "captured" by activists who were trying to stop them from giving the government an excuse to send in the police, were actually CPI(M) cadres. Ammini Hamsakkali, a secondary leader of the AGMS, like Janu comes from Thrisilleri where the CPI(M)-AGMS conflict was particularly intense. Ammini however articulates a story that is common in AGMS circles:

> "A day before the [Muthanga] firing happened, CPM [CPI(M)] people came to set fire to elephant dung and throw it on our huts to create trouble...it was CPM people who did it. Do you know that? Did you know it was the CPM? So now you know who they are. What all they are capable of just to destroy our struggle... They set fire and cut trees and then went to the collector to blame it on us".

Even the death of one of the policemen at Muthanga is blamed on the CPI(M):

> "It was not Janu or Geethanandan or anybody who killed, but the people of the CPM. It was the people of the party who did it. They did it to destroy the struggle".

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[93] This perception was nurtured by Congress, which posted page-wide advertisements in all major newspapers in 2001 when the agreement was signed between Antony and Janu, showing the silhouette of a curly-haired tribal woman with baby and claiming that Congress had been the first to help the tribals.

And they had a reason too, according to Janu:

> "It was the need of the political movements of Kerala, the NGOs, the social organizations and everyone, *but above all the Communist party,* that the Muthanga struggle should be pictured as a terrorist struggle. They want it to be pictured like this because…all these years it was with the people here that they nourished their movements …founded the organizations and in the case of NGOs, made the projects… So if these people go for a struggle, get land, start cultivating things for their living, send their children to school and get educated they will no longer be available for the these political movements and NGOs…".

Even so, Communist party membersare usually convinced the AGMS' main goal is to destroy the Communist movement, by"dividing the unity of the struggling masses". Behind all kinds of set-backs the Communist party suffers, they have come to see the hand of the AGMS, in service of larger "vested interests". When in 2006 the AGMS formed a political branch – though it had claimed not to be interested in elections – and on top of this allied with the Congress-led block and publicly declared it would "work to ensure the defeat of the CPI(M)-led Left Democratic Front" (*The Hindu,* 13 March 2006), most Communists saw all their worst suspicions confirmed. Both political camps have hence come to suspect the other intensely, believing it is working for its chief enemies in a perverse, hidden way. Both groups are preoccupied with discovering the "real" other and have become entangled in interactive spirals of suspicion on everything from the question of who the others really are and what their "real" intentions are, to what they are "actually" doing. In the interactive dynamics of such animosity, structural characteristics and processes that both Communists and indigenist activists face become vehemently projected onto the other. It is precisely in such circles of dis-identification, that we can start to understand why indigenist activists felt the need to pose their challenge to the status quo in such radically different terms to that of traditional leftist political discourse.

5.2.1 *WILL THE REAL ADIVASI STEP FORWARD…?*

One important issue around which dis-identification takes place is the problematic of defining "adivasiness".In the face of public criticism about whether or not they are representing – and being led by – "real adivasis", mutual accusations abound. Communist party members are convinced they are on the side of the "real" adivasis as against "variantsofidentity politics promoted by foreign funded NGOs that seek to fragment and separate adivasi identities obliterating the class nature of exploitation" (as Brinda Karat put it in the CPI(M)'s theoretical quarterly *The Marxist,* in September 2010). In this vein, a Kurichiya (ST) state committee member of the AKS was at pains to prove his genuine adivasiness in reference to the heroic

struggles of Thalayakkal Chandu, the Kurichiya leader of a guerilla against the British, and concluded with reference to the AGMS:

> "this is what is different about the AKS. All *our* leaders are adivasis."

In contrast, he immediately continued in accusatory tone

> "Geethanandan set up this *gothra padasala* (clan school) here and just appointed some outside staff. Geethanandan himself is not even an adivasi. He belongs to the Scheduled Castes."

Also P K Kalan stressed this point: that Geethanandan, as a dalit, would never be able to "truly understand adivasi problems", though he was leading their movement. Kalan was rather suspicious of Geethanandan's leadership:

> "That is the reason why all these problems [at Muthanga] happened. Keeping Janu at the front of everything and using her as a shied, they exploited the adivasis. ... They are controlling Janu. She can't move on her own."

Written works by Communist members and sympathizers arefull of allegations that C K Janu is not who she pretends to be – not a true fighter for the adivasi cause but rather the embodiment of all the major enemies and competitors of the Communists. As Aboo Backer, frequent commentator on adivasi issues in *The Marxist*, writes:

> "C K Janu has been the creation of the bourgeois politics with the cunning assistance of the naxalite groups of the state in order to tamper with the long enduring solutions to the Adivasi questions introduced by the last LDF regime".

And he continues,

> "the traditional anti-Marxist media lent their full support to this agitation, in the process trying to project C K Janu as the real saviour of the tribals. However it was an attempt to thwart the Adivasi agitation and their demands" (Backer 2005: 108).

The participation of adivasis in Communist-organized conventions, Backer however consoles Communists, proves that

> "the paper organizations [the AGMS] sponsored by the vested interests do not actually represent the genuine Adivasis" (ibid: 109).

An elderly Paniya Communist whom I spoke to in Palakkad added to this line of argument another reason why Janu was not representative of the "real" adivasi cause:

> "This so-called C K Janu, where did she suddenly come from? What does she know? If she were a real adivasi she would know to let the elders lead..."

For every Communist suspicion of the genuineness of indigenist activists there are, however, as many counter-suspicions and counter-claims to the effect that underneath Communist party rhetoric a divisive and deeplyanti-adivasi and dalit politics operates. According to Janu, the very definition that most politicians, including Communists, use incorporates a notion that adivasis should remain numb. As she says with regard to the Muthanga struggle:

> "When the police started inflicting violence on some of us and the youngsters started fighting back... we are to study that incident. When someone says Janu and her friends are violent and they are not adivasis, they imagine adivasis as persons who are to bear all possible torture and violence.Even if an adivasi got brutally murdered, we are not supposed to question it. The adivasi has to endure all that torture, trauma, and violence with mute consent. Those who react are not adivasis. So we have to analyze that one particular question itself. When they say that those who react are not adivasis, actually they are giving the accurate answer of what they consider adivasis should be."

As most indigenist activists agree, the Communist party systematically negates any agency on the part of dalits and adivasis. As Sunny, a dalit activists related to the AGMS, argues,

> "Now Marxists are claiming to be in favor of the adivasi, the dalit. But their very ideology negates us. 'Where is caste?' these materialists ask us. 'where is caste?'.We cannot say to a materialist that caste is a social condition. He wants to see it: 'No, no, you must show me caste, where is caste? There is no caste. Ha!' And then we came, a true dalit adivasi movement. How did these Marxists react? 'Aha, for the last forty years there is no caste in this society, now suddenly there is caste...who is behind it? Ah, it is the dalit, it is the adivasi!'".

According to indigenist activists, though the AKS denies any positive political contribution by adivasis and dalits, it itself is the real farce. As Geethanandan argued:

> "Now the CPI(M) also has this adivasi organization, AKS...I also talked to their leader...Vijayajan Kani [laughs] ... he belongs to the Kani community.... He is the one from an adivasi community there. Everything is controlled by the political party leaders. Kani is not like Janu, he's not representing the different communities of adivasis. See Janu, she is a nationalist leader, a national leader of the adivasis. All the different nationalities – Paniya, Adiya, Kurichiya – she is representing them. But in the Kshema Samithi they are all represented by party leaders.. It's a problem they're facing. But they can rally people anyway because they have money, they have a political apparatus in each and every village."

As another AGMS activist told me about the AKS:

> "It's not a democratically organized tribal community, it's just a trust, a registered trust.. and all the members...all seven members who registered this society, not a single one of them is adivasi!".

5.2.2 *"IF ADIVASIS DEVELOP THEY CANNOT PLAY WITH THEM"*

Another mutual suspicion projecting structural difficulties onto the closest political opponent is the notion that the other "wants to always keep adivasis as a backward group", as an Adiya member of the AKS expressed it. The logic of the allegation is that rather than the oppressed needing leaders, it is leaders who need the oppressed.

> "They don't let adivasis achieve good standards of living and culture. They want to keep adivasis without any social refinement",

the same Communist member said, adding

"What Geethanandan and others are trying to do is to make sure adivasis will always be under them. They want adivasis to dance according to the tunes they play."

A Kurichiya AKS member put it even more forcefully:

"Janu and Geethanandan are people who don't want any good to happen to adivasis. If adivasis develop they cannot play with the adivasis".

The idea resonates directly with statements from Communist leaders such as Pinarayi Vijajan who after the agreement between the AGMS and (Congress) Chief Minister A K Anthony was signed in 2001, argued in front of a convention of the AKS that the whole strike was merely an "image-building exercise" for Anthony and Janu:

"The Adivasis have earned nothing from the agitation of Janu. It was Janu who earned a good [media] coverage" (*The Hindu*, 18 October 2001).

Most Communists believe that outside of the spotlights of the media, all but neglected, the genuine force pushing for adivasi welfare was the Communist party. Even according to Communist MLA P Krishnaprasad, who usually refrains from fueling the antagonism between the AGMS and the AKS,

"the bourgeois media projected the Gothra Mahasabha agitation as the only case of resistance put up by the tribals, and tried to suppress the news of AKS struggles".

According to Suresh, a Paniya member of the AKS, Janu and Geethanandan were preventing adivasis from "rising to the forefront of society" by "reviving old superstitious beliefs". The *poojas* and other rituals he had seen AGMS followers do, he believed were aimed at "mystifying" their thoughts and preventing them from understanding the bigger picture:

"We don't want adivasis to leave their ways and rituals. We want the believers to continue in their beliefs. But [unlike the AGMS] the Adivasi Kshema Samithi supports nor allows beliefs and rituals that are blind".

AGMS activists in turn are convinced the Communist parties prefer to keep adivasis in an impoverished, desperate position so that they remain their natural constituency even though the actual constituency of the CPI(M) has become the middle-class. The key issue for the Communist party, according to indigenist activists, is to gather "vote banks" and for this top priority it will neglect all other issues. Kavitha, a Kurichiya activist with the AGMS, even told me:

"I joined with Janu *chechi* [elder sister], to work with her. But I had no ill feeling toward the party at all. I used to give them my vote. But I wanted to work with Janu because of the land issue. Then party people started discriminating against us, calling us 'Janu's people', saying 'soon she will be giving her vote to Janu..'."

The obsession of the Communist party with elections also caused bitterness for another Paniya activist of the AGMS:

"Now there's elections coming up again. So what happens? We were about to get the title deeds [for the land occupied at Aralam farm]. But the CPM [CPI(M)] men influenced the Collector and the Revenue Department and somehow got it stopped. AKS

now can promise that with the next elections, if CPM wins, all will get land. But how can we trust the CPM? If they win, for five years nothing will happen. Only near elections, they will make a few gestures, just enough to secure their vote. If they wanted, we could all have had title deeds long time ago – but then how to pressurize us to give our vote..".

Every move the CPI(M) makes towards adivasi identity politics – their appreciation of Ambedkar, their turn to using the notion of "dalit" rights, their call for an "intensified struggle for adivasi rights", and various symbolic gestures such as their role in institutionalizing the "P K Kalan prize"[94] or the "Ambedkar award"[95]-- hence become interpreted as electoral moves and attempts at co-opting the indigenist movement. As Geethanandan argues,

"Of course Communists argue that Ambedkar is a very good person. Ambedkar fought against caste, didn't he? It's part of democratization and Communists also stand for democratization. ...so Ambedkar who fought against 'casteism' and tried to democratize India is part of Communism...[they will reduce his thought to] nothing more than that!".

The formation of the AKS is generally interpreted precisely as an attempt to "secure the adivasi vote bank" in reaction to C K Janu's increasing popularity and her exposure of the Communist party's moral corruption.As Maren, one of the Adiya activists I interviewed, said

"The AKS is an organization that was formed only after Janu's organization came into action. At the time of Janu's strike [Muthanga] all the adivasis stood behind her.So they neglected the Communist party. Naturally it would loose its adivasi vote bank. So it became very dissatisfied with Janu's organization and formed the AKS to spread the rumor that 'Janu won't get you land. Only we can do that for you.' I'm skeptical of that statement. At the time of the previous UDF government we were getting 10 kilo of free ration during rainy season. Now with LDF government we are getting only 5 kilos – even though most adivasis are now with the AKS, not with Janu! The situation is in their [the Communists'] favor now [they are in government] so they should keep their promises. But all they are interested in it to get the adivasi vote".

Sajitkumar, a dalit activist in the AGMS, echoes the same idea:

"The Communists who claim to work for the poor subverted our strikes by forming a parallel organization called AKS. They stole our agenda and plans."

The fact that the AKS is out to co-opt the movement into Communist networks is all the more noticeable according to Geethanandan when considering the treatment Janu received from the Communist party:

"Janu was formerly in this Communist party, you know? During that period she was *very* acceptable to them [laughs]. Till the end of the 1980s she was an active worker for the party. And her uncle Kalan, he is still politically active, he is in the Communist party .... a block representative member of the Marxist party. He is very acceptable to the Marxist party. But Janu is not acceptable – why? Up until 1990, end of 80s, she was very acceptable, as an 'agricultural laborer' and an activist. But after 1989 she came out of

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[94] In an interesting twist of historically loaded last names, on December 21st 2009, dr. Vishnu Namboodiri, received the P K Kalan prize, awarded to him by the ruling LDF Minister for Education and Culture.

[95] Described to me by dalit activists as "the award for dalits working against dalits".

the Marxist party and started organizing adivasis in a different way, on a community basis…and they started opposing her. ..They initially said adivasis should not be organized on a community basis…but after two three years they started organizing adivasis in the Kshema Samithi. On community basis! This same Communist Party. Generally they are working on a class line…then why are they organizing this Kshema Samithi?".

If the Communist party was really interested in their well-being, activist argue, it would have acted on their behalf long before Muthanga:

"It's just part of their survival strategy that now they are trying to point to all they have done for adivasis.But it's only after Muthanga that the Marxist party came to stand with us. Did they not realize before that most adivasis do not even have a piece of land to burry their dead? Were they unaware that we had no land? They knew it…now it's not that they really want to speak for us, they just have their interests to protect".

5.2.3 *IMAGINED ECONOMIES OF EXPLOITATION AND BETRAYAL*

The most intensely polarizing views of both camps go even further than to allege the other is hoping to keep adivasis oppressed, claiming that the 'other' leadership is actively exploiting or oppressing its followers. The structural differences between an institutionalized, well-resourced party able to pay its staff salaries and a beginning movement without permanent income become interpreted by both parties as exhibiting malicious intent on the part of the other. The wildest stories were circulating in Communist party networks about C K Janu having, under false promises, collected money from the poorest tribals and buying herself a "lavish life-style". As a Kurichiya member of the AKS told me:

"Things happened to Janu all of a sudden. She was born to an agriculturalist's family. She was poor like any other adivasi. Now suddenly she has a huge house[96] and all kinds of luxuries. She built that house in two years time. How could she do that in two years time? That is what our question is. We know they are getting foreign money. That is how they get that much money."

Such stories were then often contrasted to the story of P K Kalan (the Adiya Communist and Janu's uncle) had refused, even as panchayat president, to accept money to build a house for himself and had used the money instead to build a school-building for children. Unlike those in other movements, the argument went, Communists were not after greed and corruption. A Communist journalist I often spoke to was, as many Communists are, convinced there were all kinds of unscrupulous people, including Naxalites and C K Janu, making money at the expense of poor tribals:

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[96] I've seen C K Janu's new house and must say it takes some imagination to, in the context of Kerala, call it a "huge house".

> "They will tell foreigners that the adivasis here in Kerala are so poor and they are starving and so on. They send reports to foreign countries describing the plight of the adivasis.And they receive money in return for that. They get a lot of money from abroad in name of the adivasis. The adivasis don't even know that others are taking money in their name. Is this not exploitation? It's nothing but exploitation."

The line of argument even sometimes stretches beyond the leadership to defame the followers of the other movement as dupes or, in CPI(M) leader Pinaraji's words, the few "gullible and apolitical" amongst the adivasis (*The Hindu*, 18 October 2001). The AKS in contrast, its members claim, helpsrather than takes from poor adivasis:

> "Did you see how much money they collected for the Muthanga occupation? 500 rupees they collected from each of these poor adivasis. And nothing did they get in return. AKS is not like that. It is not the way the AKS functions. We do not take money from poor adivasis!".

AKS members interpreted the "self-help groups" that the AGMS was organizing at Aralam farm (one of its land occupations), to pool agricultural products and trade them cooperatively, in this same light. They were so upset by the "exploitation" going on that they organized to take over the AGMS office at Aralam farm:

> "Do you know what they are using their office building for? To collect and store coconuts and other stuff for sale. The money they made out of this went straight into their pockets. Leaders like Geethanandan did that!"[97].

Many Communists even projected the repression the AGMS experienced at Muthanga onto the AGMS leadership:

> "Janu played some games for her benefit, using people of that community [adivasis]. In Wayanad, the people who suffer the most these days are those who stood with Janu".

After the Muthanga violence, instead, it was the Communist party that people could rely on, Communists claim. As Suresh Babu, a Paniya AKS member said,

> "when all those adivasis were in jail, including workers of the Adivasi Gothra Mahasabha, people of Janu's organization… that organization of Janu didn't do anything to take them out on bail or return them to their homes. It was the Communist party and the AKS who did all the work of taking them from the jail and bringing them home safely… It was the Communist party of India that spent money for them.. Amongst all the confusion, the only one to help them was the Communist party and the other Left organizations".

Indigenist activists in turn see the Communist party's large institutional structure as seamlessly blending into local relations of power that oppress adivasi workers. And since it is often Communist networks that have penetrated deepest into rural areas with a high concentration of

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[97] An activist close to Geethanandan within the RMS in fact told me worriedly: "he is giving his whole life to these causes. What will happen in his old age? Will people remember his sacrifices when he is old and poor?".

adivasis, the most frequent complaints of direct exploitation tend to be about the Communist party. As Akkati, a Paniya activist from Thirunelli *panchayat* told me,

> "Men of our community are given toddy and arrack in the nights and girls are seduced. How many unmarried mothers there are in the panchayat!The girls are taken to see films, again and again. Films are a passion for our kids. They are tempted. After seeing the films, the parents are given alcohol and the girls are seduced. The CPM men, they are directly involved. They know they need to cover it all up."

The reason why some adivasis still stand with the party, many AGMS activists argued, is as pretence, simply to get some short-term benefits. This, however, does not make committed followers. As Janu says with reference to the AKS,

> "If I give some people 1000 rupees as salary and ask them to partake actively in the works of Gothra Sabha, and appoint someone as a leader, he or she will not necessarily become a leader. That person will come to get the salary. In the eyes of the society, this person is known as the leader. But, that person is not a leader deep inside… If you decide for yourself to come, then nothing can prevent you. That is the problem with me. Since I joined out of determination, I can't go back no matter what others say. If someone comes to kill me, I'll say 'kill me if you dare'. If I had joined on somebody else's words, I would go back when I stop getting their [financial] support. People must come with a determination that comes from within…Some come with some selfish interests, to gain some benefits. After some days, when they don't get benefits they will go back."

Indigenist activists hence argue thatthe ones who are really being duped are Communists who believe they can pay off adivasis as their unquestioning followers. As the Kattunaikan leader of a smaller, independent land occupation in Wayanad said:

> "The AKS, this Marxist party's adivasi wing, they want to gather adivasis behind them. If AKS fails to give the adivasis the promised land, definitely they will move away from the party. If they are working for the adivasis, good, then definitively they will stand with them. What is even the point in saying they are exploiting?"

Or in the words of Maren:

> "Yes, at the time of election we used to cast our votes. It doesn't mean anything. Our aim is to get land, not to support any political party."

In what is perceived purely as a landscape of electioneering and political patronage, AGMS supporters often presented themselves as the only ones with moral fiber. As Kavitha told me:

> "Two men from the [Communist] party came to my house and offered me money to speak against C K Janu in the press conference. They said they would provide for the education of my children too if I spoke against Janu. Janu may not help me in my needs. But I don't want to live with the money gained by betraying someone. So I said I would not speak against Janu and they were offended. The party has been neglecting us ever since".

5.3   CONCLUSION

To the question of what may have caused the rise of indigenism in Kerala in terms of the political dynamics involved, this second part of the dissertation has suggested an answer that emphasizes the role of the diminishing appeal of the major alternative to indigenist mobilization in Kerala, that is, the Communist movement. This diminishing appeal does not translate directly into defeat in the arena of parliamentary elections – to the contrary, the CPI(M) in fact claims it "created history" with its election victory in 2006, when it received a "whopping 65 seats and 33 per cent votes" (CPI(M) website). This, however, goes together with an increasingly disillusioned working class constituency and intelligentsia who feel that electoral Communism has clearly run its course. Many may still vote for the party to get some practical concessions through its patron-client networks and because there is no realistic electoral alternative but they no longer believe the party genuinely strives for socialist aims. The demise of the Communist party in this sense can hardly be considered a sign of democratization. Instead it seems to signal something quite the opposite: the classical social movements' dilemma of how to sustain a popular movement for social reform while at the same time participating in institutions designed to implement such reform as policy (Tarrow 1998). In the course of its continuing participation in power, all the more so when from the 1990s onward the scope for state-led socialist reform in a liberalizing economy seemed all but gone, subaltern groups in Kerala stopped believing the party still stood for greater social equality and emancipation. This, in turn, lead to a re-evaluation of earlier compromises and critiques of the "Western" bias in Indian Communism that had not allowed for a serious engagement with the issue of caste and cultural identity – just as socialist parties in Latin America and Australia are now criticized for having ignored issues of ethnicity and race. Some scholars (e.g. Yashar 2005) believe such emerging critiques shows that indigenous people were never really part of socialist initiatives – that also outside of authoritarian regimes, such socialist initiatives were merely imposed on indigenous people by non-indigenous activists and that hence the present moment is one of liberation for indigenous people. As the previous chapter showed, however, many "indigenous" people in Kerala felt closely and personally attached to Communist ideals of fighting for equality and emancipation and left the party not because they could but because they were disillusioned by it. The present chapter, moreover, showed how in the process of leaving the party, a rereading of history and an othering of political rivals escalated into widening circles of political dis-identification between Communists and indigenists.

The demise of socialism as a force for change was a particularly salient factor in the rise of indigenism in Kerala but is part of a much larger global conjuncture marked by the end of a

reformist cycle. The latter, according to Wallerstein (2007), was a long period that began in the mid-nineteenth century and that was characterized by the supremacy of the liberal statein combination with "anti-systemic" movements demanding inclusion through the mechanism of citizenship. This reformist period was, Wallerstein argues, one of an "optimism of the oppressed" (2007: 85) – the idea that history was on their side and that with certain sacrifices in the present, future generations would be facing a better life. By the early decades of the twentieth century, after decades of internal debate within anti-systemic movements, the "political option" had become the dominant anti-systemic strategy and there was a general agreement on a "two-step agenda of action: first obtain power in the state, then transform the world/the state/the society" (ibid.: 69). In the post-WW II period, anti-systemic movements made extraordinary progress in terms of the "first step" and Kerala, the first state to have a democratically elected Communist government, was an example to social democrats across the world. For a while, it was even believed the state might hold the key to a new, "Kerala path" to socialism, proving that socialism and liberal democracy were not incompatible after all, that even within the frame of a capitalist world economy, there was a route to the kind of democracy both socialists and liberals envisioned as their ideal. As we saw in the previous chapter, this was a period in which many adivasis and dalits – like P K Kalan - embraced the role of the party in negotiating on their behalf with the powers that be, not because they were blind to the compromises being made but because the results were indeed "progressive", opening up political and economic space for those erstwhile almost entirely excluded.

Yet as many popular left-wing movements came to power, a creeping disillusion arose with their apparent inability, once in power, of taking the next step towards social transformation. Including in Kerala, people now found themselves in the position of even being asked "not to make militant demands on what was asserted to be a government that represented them" (Wallerstein 2007: 84ff). As "the future became the present" many previously ardent militants hence "began to have second thoughts, and eventually began to dissent" (ibid.). By the late 60s, the "long-existing anger about the workings of the world-system" combined with a bitter "disappointment with the capacity of the antisystemic movements to transform the world" (ibid.). Two themes were repeated in virtually every context in the protests erupting in the late sixties: on the one hand a rejection of US hegemonic power and criticism of the collusion of the Soviet Union in the American world order and on the other, a disillusion with the failed promises of anti-systemic movements once in power. The long-term certainties that the future would be better had become transformed into "fears that the world-system might be unchanging" (ibid.). The automatic dominance of the liberal center diminished. And this, in turn, formed the context in which the left (that often did not call itself that anymore) started looking

for entirely different forms of organizing and political ideology, triggering the rise of amongst others indigenous rights movements. The kind of clash between these new movements with remainders of the traditional left that the present chapter discussed in detail is a general characteristic of the ensuing political dynamics, all the more so where the traditional left tried to co-opt the new movements through a by now impotent rhetoric of socialist developmentalism (Harvey 2003: 168). This infighting and polarization amongst those who biographically and even ideologically are in fact so close is all the more indicative, however, of the diminishing political space for those currents seeking to resist the ever more unrestrained accumulation and concentration of capital that was unfolding globally from the late seventies. For the crisis of reformism that appeared in the late sixties did not trigger only new social movements -- it also triggered a fierce and remarkably successful reaction from the right: the capitalist establishment's counter-revolution of neoliberalism. The effects of the latter and how they conditioned the rise of indigenism in Kerala in more structural ways is the focus of the next part of this dissertation.

PART 4

CONDITIONING INDIGENISM:

THE "KERALA MODEL" IN CRISIS

CHAPTER 6

SALARIED SUBALTERNS:

ON THE VULNERABILITY OF SOCIAL MOBILITY

In this fourth part of the dissertation, I turn to the study of shifts in structural power relations that "conditioned" the rise of indigenism in Kerala. I focus on the kind of forces that shape the setting in which the political dynamics I discussed in part 3 unfolded and consider the changing political economy of the Kerala model of development. I hence study how changes in the context of people's everyday lives may have conditioned their attraction to new forms of contention -- to indigenist rather than Communist visions thereof. In doing so, I propose an explanation that goes beyond a dominant structural explanation for the global rise of indigenism: that indigenism was a way for indigenous people to defend their communities' cultural integrity, with whatever organizational and legal frameworks available, in the face of neoliberal dispossession and disintegration (e.g. Niezen 2003, Yashar 2005). This prevalent explanation sees indigenous people's action deriving from a combination of cultural attachments and rational individual choices against the threat that neoliberalism poses to indigenous ways of life. Instead of this, I propose a perspective that studies how the rise of indigenism was shaped by the process of economic restructuring itself – by the crisis of the Kerala model. For it is only the fact that indigenism is conditioned by, and not just a reaction to, neoliberal restructuring, that can give us clues to how, in interaction with the political dynamics discussed in the previous part of this dissertation, more structural changes may also have encouraged contemporary articulations of subaltern protest in Kerala to take an indigenist form.

Connecting the rise of indigenism to economic restructuring in this way means understanding it in terms of everyday, lived experiences. I rely in this on an "expanded" class perspective that takes class an analytical concept as "rooted in the basic and never frictionless ties and interdependences between … people as arising from their efforts to survive and maintain themselves" (Kalb 1997: 2).

Used in this way, the concept of class helps to relate the daily necessity of securing a living and the human need for orientation and meaning deriving from this with the changing regimes of production and appropriation in which such experiences take place. It thereby provides more relational and grounded insights into the process through which people became attracted to the

politics of indigenism. I do not take class as yet another "factor" explaining the attraction of indigenism besides for instance the compulsions of "culture", the drive of "self-interest", or the determinants of law: class added in such a manner in fact means depriving class analysis of its synthetic power (Thompson 1965). Cultural, self-interested or legal determinants are not insignificant in contributing to the rise of indigenism but have more explanatory power when interpreted in terms of a relational and historical class perspective that refuses to dis-embed people's beliefs, interests, and practices from the everyday conflictive context of living in an evolving capitalist world system. It is precisely by posing the question of the rise of indigenism, i.e., by looking at the process of political identification rather than the static question of political identity, that class as a historical relationship of power can be seen to have a determinant role, limiting what is possible and pushing towards what is likely though never predefining the outcome.

At a global scale, we may begin to envision the recent process by which people's working lives have become transformed in terms of what Wallerstein (2007) called the capitalist establishment's counter-revolution to the world revolution of 1968. This "counter-revolution" entailed a shift in global capitalism in the late twentieth century from "expanded reproduction", a capitalist logic of deriving profits from the intensification of production, to "accumulation by dispossession", the endless repetition of what Marx called primitive accumulation (Harvey 2003). Accumulation by dispossession relies on intensified formsof commodification and the privatization of common forms of property rights, the forceful expulsion of people from their land, and the imposition of various types of austerity programs that disposes people of the socio-economic rights won in previous decades.These are usually, as David Harvey stresses, coercive processes in which the state's monopoly of violence and definitions of legality are key. Also in India, struggles over land - the most literal "green field" to be converted into financial profit - intensified after the Indian federal government embraced economic "liberalization" in the early 1990s: large areas of land were sold off to mining companies and traded on the stock market (Roy 2010), big dam building increased in pace (Khagram 2004), and Special Economic Zones occupied ever more space (Banerjee-Guha 2008; Levien 2011) – each of these projects relying on the massive deployment of police forces and even the army to clear the land of people living there.

Yet in Kerala the process is subtler than elsewhere. Kerala's government did not allow for large-scale or violent evictions of peasant land nor did it introduce dramatic structural adjustment policies. What did happen is that with liberalization in 1991, capital further abandoned this state,already famous for its "troublesome" (strike-prone) population (Kannan 1999; Neilson and Pritchard 2009). A massive "people's planning campaign" was initiated by several key

Communist party members in reaction, channeling more than a third of government funds directly to the municipal level to support small-scale productive initiatives in order to revive Kerala's economy. Initiators of the campaign were confident a "new Kerala model" was continuing, in changed circumstances, the old Kerala model of ensuring general well-being (Isaac 2001). The decentralization campaign was not however enough to compensate for the lack of manufacturing capital invested in the state and itself became the subject of neoliberal cooptation (Menon and Nigam 2007). The old Kerala model, it became clear, did not merely signal Kerala's exceptional commitment to redistributive and protective programs – it was also intricately part of a world historical period characterized by expanded reproduction. As this part of the dissertation shows, the global economic restructuring driven by neoliberalism did not, as some scholars continue to hope (e.g. Heller 2007), leave Kerala unaffected. Kerala is not simply one of the few remaining "social democracies" in the global South, isolated from the pressures under which so many other social democracies turned neoliberal. In fact, I would argue the Kerala model pertained more to a particular spatial and temporal conjuncture in world history than to Kerala per se.If the Kerala model was about taming the market through the enforcement of stringent labor laws and land reform, public provision of education and health-care, a broad range of redistributive welfare measures, and a relatively large public sector in both manufacturing and agriculture, the "liberalization" of the Indian economy in the 1990s was part of a process that structurally undermined these achievements.

The structural shifts affecting class relations and conditioning the rise of indigenism in Kerala were expressed differently according to the different positions of the two main classes involved in the AGMS. Whereas chapter 7 focuses on the experiences of the agricultural workers who form the rank and file of the AGMS's demonstrations and land occupations, this chapter focuses on the AGMS leadership: a vertically mobile yet vulnerable group of often well-educated, salaried adivasis and dalits who experience the effects of intensifying economic and symbolic competition in the aftermath of the Kerala model. This chapter follows the experiences of several such upwardly mobile indigenist activists, pointing out how political-economic changes affecting their lives seem to have prepared the ground for them to turn to indigenist politics. The activists who form the leadership of the Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha and who have used their educational achievements, financial resources, and social networks for the indigenist cause are generally those who have experienced some upward mobility. Minimally they are in a position to combine their unpaid public activism with the need to secure their own livelihood – the latter being difficult for landless workers who spend their days doing manual labor against

minimal wages[98]. Though class differences amongst adivasis and dalits are less than amongst other groups (Deshpande 2000: 325), the leadership of the AGMS is hence not in the same positionas its followers. The question I look at in this chapter is hence why the more upwardly mobile amongst dalits and adivasis would be encouraged by structural changes affecting them to dedicate their energy and time to organizing an indigenist movement.

The question of what motivated leadersis not often discussed explicitly in indigenous studies as leaders tend to occupy an inconvenient position. In the AGMS for instance, apart from CK Janu, most leaders have not personally experienced dire poverty and exclusion but are rather part of "mainstream" Kerala, which is precisely what they bring to the movement. Taking account of leaders' own experiences need not, however, automatically confirm utilitarian arguments: that these leaders are entrepreneurial or even "exploitative" middle-class men (sometimes women) who are in it simply for financial and cultural/symbolic gain. Such arguments do not explain the strategies they chose to do so or whythey did not turn to less risky and more comfortable avenues for self-enrichment: they could have joined the established, well-oiled networks of the major political parties all too eager to incorporate them and their followers. Yet many indigenist leadersinstead run up large debts because of their political activities and get at most an ambiguous social reputation in return. They may be known as defending "poor adivasis" yet at the same time they usually become the target of vicious smear campaigns, which can be all the more damaging for female leaders.

Gains for those leading indigenist political initiatives in Keralaare moreover not usually very direct: they are not about receiving a piece of land, which almost all leaders already have (at least on lease), nor about receiving subsidies or other such material advantages. It hence makes sense to focus instead on the experiences of indigenist leaders in their everyday lives within a particular changing regime of social (re)production. This can give a more grounded view of what enticed them to turn to indigenism. In the following paragraphs I present vignettes of the process of change with regard to two particularly important arenas in which present insecurities take shape: firstly the arena of land ownership, professional occupation, and consumption, crucial in representing social status in Kerala today, and secondly the arena of education, where middle-class[99] hopes concentrate on carrying over their own social mobility onto their children's generation.

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[98] A frequent complaint C K Janu aired to me was that rank and file would often be unable to come to meetings because they had to *kanjikudikkuk* (eat *kanji*, rice soup – i.e. make a living).

[99] I use "middle-class" here in the classic, Weberian sense of the educated, salaried middle stratum (between those performing physical labor and those owning capital) – *not* in terms of the Indian

6.1   PRIDE AND REPRESENTATION IN A BOURGEOISIFYING SOCIETY

The initial "embourgeoisement" of Kerala was arguably a product of the Kerala model of development itself: as land reform gave tenant farmers and even some agricultural workers access to land, it also turned them into small (petit-bourgeois) landowners committed to social mobility within the existing system rather than to revolutionary reform (Morrison 1997; Kannan 1999). The process started already in the 1960s and 70s. Yet it is in the course of the 1980s and 90s that successful new small landowners *en masse* started using land not so much for farming but rather as capital to raise money, through sale or loans, to underwrite the costs of setting up off-farm income-earning (Morrisson 1997). Ironically, as the potential of land as a productive resource decreased -- as Kerala's agricultural economy was opened up to international competition – land became all the more important as a sign of social standing and basis from which to draw loans to finance projects of upward mobility. The money made by educated family members who managed to get a salaried job or work in one of the Gulf states – an increasing trend from the 1970s onward – usually became invested in buying more land. Everywhere in key rice-producing regions I visited during my fieldwork in 2005-2006, I could see paddy fields being filled up with soil to turn them into ordinary real estate plots. Interest in land as a key form of symbolic capital was moreover reflected in the sharp rise in land prices -- up to two thousand percent since 1980 (Osella and Osella 2000: 146). As Osella and Osella (ibid.) observed, many people buy land for habitation as soon as enough money is available and only then later start constructing a house on it. Agricultural land is bought even later, if at all. Amongst non-SC/STs in Kerala, landlessness decreased from 12% to 7.7% between 1982 and 1992 (Omvedt 2006: 192): not some belated Kerala-model style land reform[100] but a reflection of the fact that everybody who could was privately investing in land.

The percentage of landlessness for SCs and STs in Kerala, though it has also decreased, still however remains more than double that of other communities (Omvedt 2006: 192.). Both dalits and adivasis moreover were hard hit by the rising unemployment in Kerala in the 1990s and overall had less access to Gulf money (ibid.). Even those who did manage to progress

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euphemism for the hyper-rich, less than 1% of the population, who draw their income from the profits and rents of large private enterprises.

[100] Legislatively, land reform in Kerala started in 1957, when the first Communist government of the state immediately introduced its comprehensive Kerala Agrarian Relations Bill (KARB). In terms of implementation it was only with the Kerala Land Reforms (Amendment) Act of 1969, however, that implementation finally took off and reached a real momentum in 1975 with the simultaneous streamlining of bureaucratic procedures and need to counter the Naxal "threat" that characterized the Emergency period. By 1981, more than 99% of over 3,5 million cases for tenant-farmer ownership of land and over 400,000 cases for workers' ownership of homestead land had been resolved (largely in favor of tenants and workers) by the Land Tribunals (see Radhakrishnan 1981).

significantly in comparison to the generation of their parents by acquiring land or a professional job, started to see their achievements pale in comparison to the stream of Gulf money – estimated at no less than $150 billion in total over the last three decades (Oommen 2010:80) – that was flowing mostly towards other communities, who were in turn investing it in private education and land. They also felt the tensions produced by the increasing competition to express one's self and family name through consumption. As much as production has stagnated in Kerala in the past two decades, consumption thrives. Oommen (2010: 73) has found that since 1993-4, Kerala has had the highest per capita consumer expenditure of all Indian states – a figure that has even grown exponentially since then. The divide between the poorest and the richest groups in terms of these consumption figures is growing and Kerala's Gini coefficient has increased tremendously – it is now estimated at 41%, second only to Chattisgarth (ibid.). I turn here to studying concretely how such structural processes may have impacted on the lives of those who became indigenist leaders. For the sake of introducing a number of less known protagonists of the indigenist scene in Kerala, the secondary leaders we meet in this chapter – Sunny, Ammini, Ashogen, Mamman, and Krishnakumar – are not the same as those whose biography I discussed already in chapter 4. The changing political-economic circumstances and subsequent dilemmas we read through the lives of the protagonists introduced here, however, are very similar to those forming the background to the life stories I discussed of C K Janu, Geethanandan, and Soman.

6.1.1 *"IT'S NOT ABOUT EARNING MORE. IT'S ABOUT DIGNITY."*

Sunny, a Pulaya (SC) man now in his forties, has for years been an important actor-behind-the-scenes of the AGMS' actions and a major intellectual force behind the movement. Reminding once more of the activist biographies discussed in chapter 4, his parents were CPI(M) supporters and his elder brother was a Naxalite. Yet despite being familiar with Marxist theory Sunny is radically opposed to it. What he hates in particular is how Kerala Communists use class to deny the reality of caste. The focus of his activism and thinking is hence precisely the issue of caste and his inspiration he draws primarily from the work of dr. Ambedkar. Sunny is also passionate about relying on the historical experience of Dravidian society, from which both adivasis and dalits descend, which was much more egalitarian than the Brahminical, caste society that came to replace it. According to Sunny, adivasis embody the ideals of the Dravidian era more so still than dalits as they escaped to its margins whereas the latter became incorporated as the new society's slaves.

Sunny's grandparents spent their lives working the paddy fields of upper-caste landlords. Even Sunny worked in paddy fields in his youth and lived just on the edge of these. His family benefitted from land reforms to the extent of being granted a homestead but, unlike tenant farmers, they did not receive enough land to make a living without engaging also in day labor (*coolie panni*). Sunny was determined not to make a living in agriculture. He hence pursued his education all the way to college and managed to get an office job. He now lives in a rented house in a mixed middle-class neighborhood in the town of Kottayam. It is not the very best of neighborhoods: it floods so badly every monsoon the water almost comes above my knees when I walk to his house. Yet its houses are fairly large – including two bedrooms, a kitchen, bathroom, and dining room -- and many upper-caste familiesalso live there. His neighbors know well that Sunny's family is of Pulaya background and numerous quarrels with the neighbors according to Sunny boil down to their disdain of his "blackness". Sunny's household includes his wife Jessy, who was his childhood friend and comes from the same community, and their two daughters - their son drowned at a young age when they were visiting Sunny's native hamlet. A small shrine where the family's ancestors are worshipped includes a picture of their young son as well as a picture of Krishna (certainly nota dalit god) – the latter grudgingly tolerated by Sunny because one of his daughters "has taken a liking for him".

Though Sunny articulates his views with the eloquence of a philosophy professor, his job is that of a clerk at the government-run Life Insurance Company of India. It is a fairly prestigious and steady, salaried job but without too many exiting career prospects. It does not earn much in comparison to jobs in the private sector but it allows Sunny to take a loan with which he has bought a piece of land of his own where he is trying to build a house for his family. Since a formal loan alone is not enough, Sunny often however needs to turn to other networks to pursue his project. The rented home his family lives in for the moment has few upper-caste pretentions and chicken happily flock in and out of it. Yet it does have a few more expensive items such as a television set, a computer, many books, and a Singer sewing machine. His daughter one day shows me the family's latest acquisition: a DVD player. Now, she hopes, she can finally play the collection of Malayalam and Tamil films she has been cherishing and singing the tunes of while her more studious sister works on her homework. Unfortunately, to the skeptical amusement of Sunny, it turns out the DVD player is rather useless as it refuses to play any of the DVDs she feeds it. Not too surprised or upset about the failing DVD player, Sunny comments that they will have it looked at in a repair shop and meanwhile, he teases her, "you could always try doing some homework instead…". Another day something more substantial materializes in Sunny's home: the rickety wooden stools and bed surrounding the television

have been replaced by a sofa set taking up more or less the entire space of the small living room. Sunny is clearly in a good mood about it and tells me a little anecdote about the sofa:

> "These Marxist say in Kerala there is no caste? Let me tell you about caste. My mother and I, we were visiting one upper-caste home some day and there was a sofa like this. And my mother? She was too embarrassed to sit on it. She didn't dare. She sat on the very edge of it, almost fell off...!"[101].

In another telling instance of everyday relations and events experienced in terms of caste, Sunny comes home one day angry at a confrontation he had at his work. His superior had placed a phone on his desk that day and he had immediately noticed the strange looks some of his co-workers had given him. One of them had eventually said "Oooh, you are getting a phone?!". Sunny said he knew exactly what was implied and had retorted "Who are you? I know who I am but who are you, who are you to make a comment like that?". "He only made that comment because I'm black", Sunny told me.

> "That is caste. I am willing to die rather than work in the paddy fields. Not as an agricultural laborer in any case. I want to break that tie between caste and labor. Let no one ask 'where is our agricultural laborer now? Oh, he is sitting at a desk, he is getting a phone?!' We dalits need to take on other jobs, in order to have dignity. It's not about earning more. It's about dignity."

Sunny often emphasized this point about dignity to me. Also for instance when one day he invited me to his native village, hiring a classic "ambassador" car for the occasion. Walking along the small paths besides the paddy fields of in his native village, where the car cannot pass, he points at the coconut trees and reminds me of the joke in Kerala about K R Narayanan, the first Dalit president of India, of the Paravan caste traditionally assigned the task of plucking coconuts:

> "They say, when the flag hoisting ceremony is going on, they need to hold him down or he will climb the flag post. It's because of the traditional occupation of his caste, climbing coconut trees, tapping toddy [an alcoholic coconut juice]. That is the Kerala mentality!".

The tendency Sunny sees in Malayalees of always perceiving someone according to his traditional caste occupation rather than his present position or capacities is something he most passionately critiques. With a smirk on his face, Sunny adds to the story,

> "I used to climb all these trees in my youth too you know ...[then, pointing to his protruding belly]...these days no longer, now I am a so-called *activist*".

Sunny then tells me about the history of the paddy fields themselves:

> "You know they used to say a dike like that [around the paddy field]needs the sacrifice of a Pulaya, otherwise it won't be solid enough? All these dikes are built of our dead

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[101] There is a beautiful scene in the classic Malayalee movie *Chemmeen* where the (dalit) fisherman coming to the *mudalali* (capitalist – upper-caste) home is told to sit on the available chair but hardly dares do so and likewise almost falls off.

bodies.[102] And all these Leftists complaining that there is no paddy cultivation going on in Kerala? I am happy, let the Namboodiris and Pillais [upper-castes] go and do paddy cultivation if they so want to. No Paniya or Pulaya should be doing this."

For Sunny, "dignity" is something he has come to experience and perceive particularly in terms of caste identity, reinforced in the kind of everyday interactions that accentuate the vulnerability of his upward mobility. Whereas for some this leads to tireless efforts at "fitting in" and keeping up with middle-class status competition, Sunny deals with these dilemmas in a more politicized manner. He has come to be vocal about what he sees as a Dravidian custom of ancestor worship but tolerates his daughters "flirtations" with the god Krishna. The consumption durables trickling into the house are likewise treated with some skepticism – they are certainly not venerated as symbols of belonging to mainstream culture. On the other hand, Sunny is also not particularly obsessed with accumulating wealth by all means possible - the way he spends his money, e.g. on hiring a nice car for a day, wouldperhaps not be the most "rational" way of doing so. The crux for Sunny seems to be neither strict adherence to a particular cultural ideal, nor the pursuit of material affluence, but the desire to be free of relations of dependence and inferiority carried from one generation to the next. Considering Sunny's "absolute progress" in economic terms and the fact that his frustrations are more about social humiliations than about being particularly exploited at work, it is perhaps logical that his politics stresses the issue of "identity" – which according to the political dynamics in Kerala today is more likely interpreted as dalit identity than class identity. Moreover, though Sunny is skeptical about the consumer boom in Kerala and related market processes, his anger is understandably more about the existing inequalities this magnifies than about issues like Kerala's increased dependence on rice import, which is an issue animating many Communists. Despite the worries of many Malayalees about the decline of their food sovereignty, Sunny points out that few are willing to do the kind of manual and agricultural work associated with lower-caste status. Like them, Sunny aspires the security and status of owning land and a home of his own, if anything to confront the consumptive competition with his neighbors and colleagues from a more confident critical position.

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[102] The collective memory of slavery among Dalits in Kerala contains many stories of the harsh labor, mostly by Pulaya and Paraya workers, involved in the reclamation of the backwaters in the 1930s and 40s – for a description of such stories see Mohan (2011: 541).

6.1.2 *"LET THEIR WIVES AND DAUGHTERS WORK THE FIELDS!"*

Ammini, a rather fierce and talkative secondary leader of the AGMS had a similar critique of Kerala society as Sunny did. She had gained a leading role in the aftermath of the Muthanga occupation when Janu was in jail and acquired fame for a picture taken during the police confrontation at Muthanga that showed her in a defiant pose, apparently taunting the police to shoot her. She likes telling the story to me, repeating to me how she told the chief police officer

> "You there in the front...you do one thing, if you want to attack these people then shoot me first!".

Ammini is of Kattunaiykan background – a relatively small "tribe"who used to practice swidden agriculture but lost access to the land they used to work, either because they were denied access to it by the forest department or because settlers took it over.Explaining her community's history to me, Ammini tells me:

> "our grandfathers possessed land. But suppose I have an acre of land and then a person will come and he would be amiable and he would say '*moopa* [chief], I am from such and such a place, I don't have land to make a shelter, it would be so kind of you to give me a piece of land to put up a house'. Then we will allow him a piece of land. Then after some time he will turn up with some money or some paddy. By influencing us like this he will make all the documents about the ownership of the land in his name[103] – we won't have any legal documents to prove that it's our land. Though deep in our heart we know it is our land, the outsider will be powerful enough to influence the government officials to forge the document..".

Kattunaikans are generally one of the poorest "tribes" in Kerala, though they do not have a slave past like the Paniya and the Adiya. Ammini, moreover, is better off than the rest of her family, having married a Muslim contractor who owns a stone quarry. She lives with him and their eight children in a lower middle-class house with garden. Their social position seems just enough to make them aspire to middle-class status, yet with not quite enough cash income or assets to reach this position. This was noticeable for instance in Ammini's slight obsession during our first interview with the fact that AGMS activists had promised her a mobile phone:

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[103] The transfer of land from tribal to non-tribal ownership is in principle illegal and if a bureaucrat indeed would have conspired in actually transferring the title deeds, he/she would be liable to punishment. Yet, sometimes the land adivasis were using was not registered under their name to begin with and many loopholes moreover exist in the prevention of transfer of tribal land. The title deeds as proclaimed by the local municipality according to whomever has greatest informal influence on its officials and the title deeds as recorded in official records need not, moreover, be the same. For those with little power to demand transparency, it is impossible to ascertain the legal truth as to on whose name land is really registered. For this reason, in Tamil Nadu, the Right to Information Act has recently been used by Dalit groups to demand transparency on land ownership registration, also in the case of Scheduled Castes, sometimes legally remained with them though the municipality had conspired in proclaiming it transferred to others.

"They [activists] are really happy with me. They had promised me a mobile phone. [Neighboring women from other castes] were upset when they heard it – they asked why I would need a mobile phone..".

And Ammini continued, only barely hiding her disappointment behind a smile,

"they [activists] were joking. They said it as a joke".

Despite not being able to afford a mobile phone, all Ammini's children go to school and two have already attained their Secondary School Leaving Certificate.

Ammini's story is similar to that of Sunny's in terms of the vulnerability of her slight upward mobility but more clearly demonstrates the gender dynamics involved that in turn reflect the gendered trajectory of the Kerala model of development. Though the decline of matrilineal traditions amongst the (higher-caste) Nayar and other communities in Kerala continued apace during the period of the Kerala model, its heydays were at least known for the exceptionally high life expectancy of women, as well as their relatively good health and high enrollment in primary and secondary education. Yet these gains of the Kerala model are presently challenged with a vengeance and one way is through the competition for prestige that the increased inequalities and insecurities of the post-Kerala model period have brought, which attach to women as status objects. The education that women enjoy is now often an asset on the marriage market rather than a means to employment and independence. The amount of shops selling gold chains for women's dowries is visibly on the rise, as are roadside billboards advertising gold. With this, the number of "dowry deaths", a phenomenon that used to be rare in Kerala, is now also on the rise (Oommen 2010: 81) and women's sexuality is increasingly guarded and policed as a woman's "reputation" has become all-important in the competition for prestige.

Adivasi and dalit communities are affected by this gendered competition for status mainly by their stigmatization in society at large as having "immoral" gender norms and by having to bear the brunt of the excesses that the obsession with women's sexuality and its policing produce from more powerful communities. Angrily Ammini tells of how her sister's son was forced to marry a Kattunaikan girl who had been made pregnant by an upper-caste man –

"his relatives came to my sister and told her just like that [that her son would have to marry the girl]. She had no choice...".

Though Ammini herself does not go out for work in the fields, her sisters generally do and Ammini knows too well the gossips about working women. They anger her because, she says defensively,

> "it is economic necessity forcing us to go out to work, it is not because we aren't honest women."

In a gendered version of Sunny's skeptical remark about upper-caste complaints about the decline of agriculture, she adds:

> "We plough and work and the *mudalali* (lit. "the one who owns capital"[104]) takes all the profits. We should refuse that kind of work. Let their wives and daughters go out and work the field!".

Both Sunny and Ammini, having achieved a steady flow of income and no longer depending on manual labor, hence continue to be intensely reminded of their social background by the effort it takes to keep up with the kind of consumptive competition – centered on land, but also including consumer durables, jewelry and gadgets like mobile phones – that has come to prevail in post-reform Kerala. Where in other parts of India, the concern about land amongst adivasi groups is triggered by the threat of dispossession, in Kerala such concern seems to be a different, though connected, expression of the increased influence of the free market after India's liberalization in the early 90s. Its conditioning of identity politics thereby seems even clearer in Kerala: whereas land dispossession by large mining corporations can – and is – contested by Naxalite groups even more than by indigenist outfits in India's central belt ("the red corridor", as it is now known), the kind of experiences encountered by people like Sunny and Ammini seem much more difficult to fit into any of the orthodox "class" discourses that both the major Communist parties and the Naxalite splinter groups in Kerala espouse. Instead both their solidarity with "their" people as well as the every-day humiliations they experience is more easily expressed in terms of their adivasi or dalit identity than in class terms.

6.2   PRIVILEGING EDUCATION: ADIVASI IDENTIFICATION AND THE "ST LIST"

Besides land, education is the most important asset Malayalees invest in to ensure - and signal - their upwardly mobile aspirations and avoid being considered "backward". Whereas in other Indian states it is often almost taken for granted that the majority of dalits and adivasis will be "uneducated", in Kerala that is no longer the case. Franke and Chasin (2000: 18) found literacy rates amongst female SCs and STs in 1997 to be 74 and 51 per cent respectively (Franke and Chasin 2000: 18) and Sreekumar and Parayil (2006: 224), though often critical of the Kerala

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[104] Expression workers in Kerala often use to refer to their employers, including small-scale industrialists or traders.

model's achievements, even show literacy rates of 57 percent for female STs (and 66% for ST men; 1999 data)– all incomparably higher than the 24 and 18 per cent for SCs and STs across India in general in the late 90s (Franke and Chasin 2000: 18). Yet from once being the corner stone of the Kerala model, education today has become the corner stone of competition in a liberalizing economy. The vulnerability of subaltern groups in this process in Kerala is the result of public education becoming overshadowed by private schools, which deepens the educational gap between SCs and STS and the rest of the population.[105] Though Kerala claims a 100% literacy rate, this does not mean the Kerala model left no educational stratification – still only 16% of STs for instance reach higher secondary education (see Dilip 2010: 20). On the other hand, a combination of decent public schooling and SC/ST "reservations" (i.e. quotas) in university, gave the generations of dalits and adivasis growing up in the 50s, 60s, and 70s the feeling that in principle they would be able to achieve a similar standard of education to others. The rate of decrease in government expenditure on education after 1990 signaled a new trend. From 1990s, the decrease has been 2% per year, which means that whereas in the 1970s education took up almost 40% of the state budget, it has now decreased to barely 18% (Oommen 2010: 77).

Reduced government expenditure has gone hand in hand with the commercialization of education and the mushrooming of unaided schools: whereas in 1990 these still only accounted for 2.5 % of students, in 2006-07 they accounted already for 8% (ibid.). Meanwhile, the number of students attending government schools – i.e., those free of fees – declined from 39 to 30.5% (ibid.). As many scholars (e.g. Osella and Osella 2000: 140 ff; Lukose 2010; Oommen 2010) argue, the arena of education in Kerala is becoming subject to significant stratification. For those who fail to have the money to invest in the widespread practice of extra tutorial teaching and to send their children to private schools more likely to provide the training and contacts necessary to get into the best colleges, constitutionally ordained "reservations" (quota) for STs and SCs in educational institutions receiving government subsidies, become crucial.[106] On top of this, the competition for civil service jobs – another arena in which ST/SC reservations are essential – has also intensified since the number of such jobs has almost stagnated since the 1980s (Kannan

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[105] M.A. Oommen (2010: 79) demonstrates the growing disparities in education, showing that whereas in 1990-91 only 2.5 percent of students went to "unaided" (i.e. private) schools, by 2006-07 this had risen to already 8 percent. He moreover links this to a persistent gap between SC/ST students and others in terms of the number of years of schooling completed as well as to the fact that whereas the richest fourth of households in Kerala send 55.5 percent of their children to private schools, this is only 3.4 percent for the poorest quartile of households, to which almost all adivasis and dalits in Kerala belong.

[106] Vinod George Joseph's (2005) novel "*Hitchhiker*", whose protagonist in a young Dalit-Christian student at a provincial high-school, powerfully dramatizes the everyday (caste) experience of such educational competition in contemporary Tamil Nadu.

1999: 175). And despite Kerala's rising growth rates since the 1990s, levels of unemployment have remained exceptionally high -- private sector jobs are not available to substitute for the increasing difficulty of getting public sector jobs

In some cases, leaders' engagement with indigenist politics is directly related to their need to be on the ST list. A salient case is that of Ashogen, another secondary leader of the AGMS who joined it when his community, the Vedan, became the rather unfortunate object of reclassification. KIRTADS, the government institution responsible, decided the Vedan could no longer be considered a tribe but ought to be considered a caste – already a problem for Ashogen's community since competing for the SC quota would be more difficult than for the ST quota (since the levels of educational attainment for STs are generally lower than for SCs). Yet though removing them from the ST list on KIRTADS' advice, the central government failed to add them to the SC list. As Ashogen put it, "We're falling in between, we're nothing!". Ashogen joined the AGMS in order to "address the ineptitude of the government's treatment of adivasis" and the injustice of his community being removed from the ST list. Such ST-SC reclassification is – as yet – however still exceptional, also because the state's definition of "tribal" status is not merely economic but also depends on notions of cultural and historical background. The indigenist activists I discuss in more detail in this section did not become involved in indigenist politics directly as the result of being taken off the ST list. Yet I will turn to discuss their experiences to study concretely how shifts in educational landscape of post-reform Kerala nevertheless conditioned their turn to indigenism, if not for direct utilitarian reasons.

6.2.1 *"IT IS WORTHY TO WORK FOR ADIVASIS, SO I AM TAKING UP THE ADIVASI ISSUES…"*

Mamman *mashe* (teacher) became involved in the AGMS after the Muthanga struggle, when many AGMS leaders were in jail. Being a relatively resourceful person, he soon became catapulted in the media as the movement's "vice-president". I interviewed him in April of 2006 at his home about half an hour from the city of Thrissur. The spacious house fit well with the other middle-class homes in his street: "It's not very much an adivasi house – people here are very forward", he comments almost apologetically. Mamman's story is that of an established yet vulnerable member of the Malayalee middle-class recently confronting his "adivasi" heritage.He built the house himself, he tells me, by taking up a loan at the time when he was still employed as a primary school teacher. He has since retired and has recently started putting all his energy into adivasi politics. It is only recently therefore that some of his neighbors have discovered he is actually adivasi himself – it is only recently he himself has started claiming this identity.

Mamman Mashe was born to the Maleria community, originally from a hill-area near Kottayam where the famous missionary Henry Baker came in the nineteenth century to set up schools as well as plantations. Mamman Mashe's grandfather owned almost a hundred acres of land at the time but was compelled to sell most of it, under pressure from planters wanting to expand their plantations. Two of his grandfather's brothers studied all the way up to 10th standard – a high level, certainly at the time – and became "writers" (i.e., clerks) at the plantation. Mamman Mashe's own grandfather, though also well-educated, did not work at the plantation but instead farmed his own land, as many people from his community did. Though Mamman would like to take pride in his grandfather's work, as a school teacher and aspiring member of the Malayalee middle-class he is critically aware of the increasing stigma on manual labor, the idea that farming is a debasing, backward practice:

> "These days it's different: those who study prefer white-collar jobs. There's a negative attitude towards farming and physical work. Some work is considered good, other work is considered bad now. In future people won't even want to brush their teeth – too much exercise!".

Like many other adivasi landowners, the land Mamman lives on now is not "ancestral land" of any kind. Rather, it was as part of the great migration wave after WWII that Mamman's father came to the area where they live now:

> "Some people from our village had come here so that's how we knew there was land here and followed. The government didn't legally give us the land but it gave silent permission. The forest department also wasn't too strict: they knew the land was being occupied in order to grow more food. These days almost all the forest is occupied – it's hard now."

Mamman's experience of acquiring the land where he has spent most of his life now is hence the same as that of other, non-adivasi settlers. Education being a key value in his community, Mamman Mashe went to college in Thrissur where the Congress party had just begun organizing a local unit. He joined the party as secretary of the unit and used to do the rounds as a campaigner. He was attracted to Congress because it was "the oldest party" and because the "violence" of the CPI(M) put him off. Congress also supported him in receiving his teacher's training.

Upon his return home Mamman was appointed "recruitment officer" and landed a job as the first primary school teacher in the village-- also becoming member of the Congress party's teachers' union. For a long time Mamman was the only teacher in the school – only later were three more teachers appointed. It was an area with mostly adivasi children, from a different community than his. When he heard of CK Janu's struggle and reflected upon the condition of some adivasi communities, he told me he realized their situation was different than his and that it was his "duty" to help "uplift" them:

"they were struggling to make ends meet. I also felt then I had to do something to help them advance. C K Janu's struggle was a real eye-opener for me".

He felt he needed to "take up the issue of social justice". Gradually he also started telling people he was actually an adivasi himself – he was not used to revealing his background to a general public. Earlier, he had only revealed his "ST" identity to the necessary bureaucrats in order to access ST quota. He had been reluctant to reveal himself as an "adivasi" partly because for a person in his position he would potentially face humiliation:

"The government and bureaucracy they knew – in job promotions, I experienced this discrimination [of being an ST]. But not from ordinary people – for they did not know. When I joined the school as teacher, the children did not know I am an adivasi. Only the office worker knew. Some people are very particular about caste and all but I pay no attention to this. The problem is when you see yourself as an adivasi and take that to be a negative thing – adivasi is not a bad thing, it is just like all others. Adivasis know two languages but then we hear 'adivasis have no culture'?! Actually they have adivasi culture.....".

When I ask whether Mamman himself speaks an adivasi language he admits he does not, explaining he is a Christian, belonging to the Church of South India (protestant) church. This, in combination with the potential discrimination coming with "ST" status, earlier had encouraged him to not to claim "adivasi" identity. Yet this changed when the educational reservations for his community came under threat:

"The Maleria are a community that benefitted a lot because of the schooling we got through the Christian missionaries. But that does not mean we are not adivasis. That is the problem we are facing these days – some groups in Congress are giving us a lot of opposition. They consider us higher, they want to take us off the ST list".

Eager to prove the genuine nature of both his adivasi and Christian identity and the fact that his community had always had a sincere desire for education rather than "money", Mamman retold the following community legend to me:

"Usually people say that those who converted, that missionaries came to them. In our case, we went to the missionaries. A hundred years or so ago, there were five hills where the Maleria lived. There was exploitation then by the Catholics living there. One day a palm reader came to the *moopan's* [headman] house and said he should go the missionaries. He went four, five times but every time the missionaries thought he came only for money, not for education. The final time, *moopan* insisted he came for education and that they should come to bring education. That's when they went there. So we are double blessed... God choose Israel – but in our case, it was we who choose God. So we are doubly blessed".

Having shared this story on the genuineness of the Maleria "choice for God", Mamman is also emphatic about his true "adivasiness":

"The Maleria are adivasi but became Christian. I know I am adivasi even though I did not work for them [politically] before. It is worthy to work for adivasis, so I am taking up the adivasi issues. There is a Maleria bishop as well. He could have spoken up for adivasis but he didn't. He is more interested in Christians than in adivasis..".

Against both the negligence of his church in emphasizing the adivasi identity of Malerias and the Congress party's efforts to take them off the ST list, Mamman felt called upon to join the AGMS and thereby both explicitly identity as adivasi and take up the task, worthy of a pensioned school teacher, of helping to fight on behalf of "poor adivasis". As he emphasized to me, collapsing both his reasons to join the AGMS,

> "Nowadays, without ST reservations, adivasis will not stand any chance to a better life. Being an adivasi myself, I felt I had to take up this cause…".

6.2.2 *"IF WE GET EXCLUDED FROM THE LIST…"*

Mamman's fears and annoyance about the threats to his community's ST status are echoed in the stories of other leading indigenist activists, such as those of Krishnakumar, a Kuruma (ST) leader of the Dalit Panthers in Wayanad. Krishnakumar's parents owned some land but lived mostly of day labor. They were traditionally with the Congress party, which they associated with Indian independence and Gandhi. Despite not having had formal education themselves, they however realized the importance of education and saved up everything they had to make sure their only son would get educated:

> "They had this awareness of the necessity of sending me to school – no idea of what to be taught, just that I should be sent to school".

During his college days at St Mary's in Sultan Battery Krishnakumar tended toward "Leftist" ideology but had little faith in political parties. Instead he joined the "Adivasi Renaissance Movement".

After meeting a group of Dalit Panthers during his days at Kozhikode Engineering College, Krishnakumar joined their organization. More strongly than his parents did, he identifies as adivasi yet not, as he puts it, in a "traditional" sense:

> "the world is changing fast now so what's the point of sticking to old traditions? If adivasis don't change, they won't survive. Take the Brahmins, they have changed and survived. If adivasis want to survive they have to dance according to a certain tune. Culture is formed by the place where you live – we don't live in the forest so we changed. Though there is something good in their way of life…we should be sensible in retaining the good things but embrace modern things..".

Like Mamman, Krishnakumar demonstrates a twin preoccupation with on the one hand supporting "poor" adivasi communities – referring generally to communities other than his own "caste" – but on the other hand insisting on the need to resist what he called "a political plot to weaken the adivasi movement" by taking some of the richer adivasi communities off the ST list:

> "it is difficult for adivasis to organize. I don't agree with these government policies [of reclassification]. What they do is to weaken the adivasis' vigor to strike. Every time the

more powerful groups will become excluded. Kurumas are now fighting for the adivasi cause – if we get excluded from the list, we won't be able to continue the [adivasi] struggle ..".

Krishnakumar also however developed a wider vision on the need for an adivasi movement precisely to counter the stigmas associated with using ST quotas. As he said,

> "there is a need to be able to call ourselves adivasis with pride".

With the increasing importance of reservations in education and the efforts of indigenist activists to make sure SC/ST quotas (generally 8% for SCs and 2% for STs in Kerala) at colleges and in the civil service are filled, the issue has received increasing coverage in the media and, as many activists claim, increasing humiliations for those entering on an SC/ST quota in the name of "merit". Indeed, many upper-castes I spoke to would passionately criticize the fact that SCs and STs could enter college with lower grades, on less "merit", than they could. As Krishnakumar told me speaking of this phenomenon,

> "They shout about merit and grades. But just because a person gets 80 percent or 90 percent why should they enter medical college? If an adivasi gets 50 percent [grade] considering all the oppression that has happened to us for the past centuries, this is as good as 95 %. Upper castes never understand this. They understand only what they want to understand...they will always bring up this issue to lower our self-esteem".

A pernicious effect of reservations, Krishnakumar argued, was that it pretended the state was historically generous and supportive of dalit and adivasi communities, whereas the opposite was true. In this context, is was no longer enough to push for generally improving education or to ensure the technical possibility of using SC/ST reservations – it was necessary for a movement to both expose the continuing oppression of adivasis, be vigilant about ensuring colleges set the right quota, and enable adivasis to take pride in their "identity".

This concern with "identity" in Kerala's changing political-economic landscape was so widespread amongst dalit and adivasi activists I spoke to that even amongst Communist party members belonging to these categories, I encountered similar concerns. Though a concern with identity had not led them to leave the party and organize on an "autonomous", indigenist basis, they did lead to pressure on the CPI(M) to also start an "adivasi" wing – the AKS. Suresh, one of the few wealthy Paniya men I encountered in Kerala and a Communist party member, generally for instance emphasized the need for adivasis to remain with the Communist party. Yet he also expressed his relief when the party decided to form the AKS. As he claimed,

> "Now we have a chance to rid adivasi communities of superstitious beliefs and promote the good parts of their [sic] culture".

He himself, despite being highly-educated at a prestigious engineering college, had experienced discrimination he told me, "nothing very serious" but enough to bring tears to his eyes when he

recalled how he had been seated at a distance from others while attending a marriage dinner a few years earlier. The issue had been "settled" by the Communist party – "they [the marriage hosts] did not realize who I was", Suresh explained: the settlement had focused on his Communist party membership rather than the issue of being discriminated as a Paniya. Suresh could not articulate exactly why the founding of the AKS had been so important for him – probably restricted by the Communist party's line against "identity politics". Yet he could not stop telling me how glad he was about the AKS's activities to uplift the adivasis so that they could leave behind their stigmatized identity. As an upwardly mobile, educated youth, it was the "identity" of being adivasi – rather than questions of poverty or exploitation – that clearly affected him most personally.

6.3   CONCLUSION

We see from the vignettes presented in this chapter that the increasing uncertainties of the new education and job market often become experienced and articulated by upwardly mobile subalterns as something threatening them as members of dalit and adivasi communities rather than as part of a collectivity of workers. The overall picture that emerges confirms the argument by Osella and Osella (2000: 353 ff.) that the increasing power of the market, both in the arena of production and in that of consumption, leads to the "substantialization of caste": since their mobility under the Kerala model was more "absolute" than relative to other communities, as soon as a polarizing market logic became stronger, subaltern groups experienced this as the resurgence of caste discrimination and fell back on – "substantiated" – their caste "identity" to confront their increasing social insecurity. As we saw in the vignettes in this chapter, most upwardly mobile dalits and adivasis now rub shoulders with members of "other" communities in many sites – in their neighborhood, at school, at marriages, at the workplace. Yet as the opportunities offered by public education have started to fall drastically behind those offered by "unaided" (i.e., private) schools and as government jobs pale in comparison to those in the global and private job market, they are increasingly reminded of their historical vulnerability. Kerala is somewhat exceptional in terms of the considerable number of ex-agricultural workers who because of relatively smaller family sizes and relatively generous welfare programs, can afford to refuse agricultural work for almost as long as it takes to find educated work (Kannan 201: 165ff.). Yet from a position of no longer being engaged as manual laborers, they are nevertheless increasingly faced with the threat of falling back to the position of a past generation – of needing to do relatively badly paid, low-status labor (*pani*) or face unemployment. This structural bind makes it again understandable why people emphasize their

dalit or adivasi identity as the primary source of their continuing vulnerability. Though we saw themes of the previous chapter – the conflict and intimacy between indigenist and Communist activists – return in the stories of the activists discussed here, such political dynamics interplay with a more structural conditioning of their turn to indigenism that lies in the kind of every-day relational experiences they encounter in efforts to make a living to secure their children's future.

That such a relational class interpretation differs for instance from a plain "rational actor" argument is exemplified by the fact that though the Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha has at times taken up the issue of SC/ST reservations (quota) explicitly – for instance in a campaign in October 2007 for the "safeguarding of SC/ST reservations" - it has generally focused on the issue of "comprehensive land reform" to ensure landless adivasis would receive land (an issue leaders continued to raise, even during this "reservations campaign"). Neither the right of dalits and adivasis to retain their position as part of the Malayalee middle-class in an increasingly competitive economic environment, nor their concerns with access to educational and civil service SC/ST quota have become anything more than secondary demands of the movement. Yet they still form the key issues that conditioned most of the more educated and aspiring middle-class leaders of the AGMS to turn to a politics of indigenism. These themes come together in emphasizing adivasi "pride" as a key symbolic aim of the movement, though the movement's leadership acquires its legitimacy – towards followers, wider sympathizers and perhaps also themselves – from the fact that they prioritize the material issues of the poorest amongst the adivasis, i.e. , their right to land.

C K Janu, the primary leader of the AGMS, is one of the few leaders of the AGMS whose background is not that of a salaried subaltern: she had no formal education and used to simply work as an agricultural laborer, without owning any land of her own. Though in the course of becoming a well-know public figure in Kerala, some of the issues to do with adivasi "pride" and "identity" also became important for her personally, the main concern she has always brought to the movement is that of the importance of providing land to landless adivasis. As we saw in chapter 4, there were clear political incentives for her to break with the Communist vision of such land reform and instead organize "autonomously" on an indigenist basis. Yet this leaves unexplained why the majority of the followers of the AGMS – landless agricultural workers like the Paniya and the Adiya who were aloof of such direct political confrontations – would also become attracted to envisioning their emancipation in terms of indigenist politics rather than the existing secular-socialist visions thereof. It moreover leaves the question of why, even if the AGMS focused on the "poorest" adivasis, the issue of land would take priority over the issue of higher wages. It is hence to this question of what conditioned the popularity of the AGMS' indigenist, land-focused program amongst so many ordinary adivasi agricultural workers that I turn in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 7

ADIVASI LABOR: OF WORKERS WITHOUT WORK

In this chapter, I turn from the study of changes in the political-economic context facing the salaried subalterns who generally form the leadership of the Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha to a discussion of the kind of changes in regimes of accumulation and development that have affected the lives of the ordinary adivasi workers who form the rank and file of the movement. These changes have, as in the case of those that affected the more upwardly mobile dalits and adivasis, accelerated during the "liberalization" of India's economy in the early 1990s. Yet they are of quite a different nature. The incorporation of ordinary workers into Kerala's political-economy is namely at the most precarious, low-waged positions. As we have seen in previous chapters, many Paniya and Adiya – amongst whom we find the largest percentages of agricultural workers - only managed to free themselves of bonded labor relations in the late 60s with the changing balance of power that settler migrants introduced, the pressure put by the Naxalite movement, and the renewed national-level commitment to ending bonded labor. Their expectations at this time were not of entering college or holding a high-ranking government job but rather of having steady employment against living wages and perhaps the chance for their children to do well in school and move away from manual labor. Yet in the 1990s, even these expectations were starting to pale as adivasi workers faced a drastic decrease in the demand for their labor following the further withdrawal of capital from Kerala and the difficulty of the agricultural sector to compete with cheaper products from abroad and from other Indian states.

The higher wages for agricultural work that were achieved as part of the labor and land reform movements of the 1960s had already led to a decreasing demand for labor in agriculture and agro-processing industries since the 1970s. As Kannan (1999: 162) puts it

> "once the threat of eviction had gone, laborers became more forceful in demanding higher wages. Landowners responded by giving up their traditional obligation to provide for regular employment" (Kannan 1999).

Yet during the 1970s and 1980s, government mediation, attempts at employment provision, and a host of redistributive and social welfare policies – not least amongst which a government-subsidized pension scheme for agricultural laborers - had managed to keep alive an idea of progress for most adivasi workers. Kannan (1999) calls these "poor-relief" programs, yet admits they still had a significant impact in lifting rural households out of poverty (1999: 163). By the 1990s, though the idea of progress was still very much alive in adivasi workers' communities, its

nature had to be drastically rethought as employment provision and welfare schemes were grinding to a halt through under-funding and mismanagement. There was, moreover, even less demand for rural manual labor: where in the late 1980s, still about 40 percent of adivasi workers had more than 200 days of employment per year, in 2003, only 4 percent of them fell into this category (Aerthayil 2008: 69 ff.).

The ethnographic vignettes in this chapter will demonstrate more concretely how political-economic changes conditioned the rise of indigenism amongst the adivasi workers who became the backbone of the AGMS. I suggest how structural changes in their lives made it more likely for these workers - for different but related reasons as when compared to salaried dalits and adivasis - to turn to indigenism instead of continue along the path of union struggles and wages strikes. I hence analyze in greater detail the impact of changes coming with the crisis of the Kerala model on two closely related groups of workers in Wayanad[107]: firstly, a group of people living in a residential "colony" who had since the late 60s been used to making a living through day labor (*cooli pani*) for local landlords and contractors; and secondly, a group of adivasi workers who had been living on some of the government plantations in the area that were originally set up to provide adivasi ex-bonded laborers with employment.

7.1   AN ADIVASI COLONY MEETS THE THREAT OF ABSOLUTE EXPEDIENCY

Kottamurade colony is an exemplary site to study the rise of indigenism amongst agricultural workers because the entire colony participated in the Muthanga land occupation organized by the AGMS in 2003 (see chapter 3). Indigenist political themes have since become hotly debated in the colony, leading some people to visibly embrace the "adivasi identity" while others have grown skeptical of the politics of indigenism. One of the women in the colony, Manju - who will reappear later in the text – for instance started decorating her home with "tribal" patterns and avoided going to church, preferring to "stay" with "our own" gods. She also decided to stop voting for non-adivasi political parties and instead proudly – even if unsuccessfully – stood as a candidate herself: an "adivasi" candidate. In contrast, others, such as Thankamma, have become suspicious of expressions of "adivasi" culture and even suspect C K Janu (the AGMS leader) was "playing a game" with them. Thankamma is even more suspicious, moreover, of Kannavu ("Dreaming"), the famous alternative school for "adivasi" children in Wayanad where they learn "adivasi" dances and traditions-- something Thankamma suspects is a plan by the "educated"

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[107] As described in chapter 3, Wayanad is the district of Kerala with the highest number of adivasis and birth place of the AGMS.

head of the school to "exploit" them. In the following paragraphs, I want to trace these divergent reactions and more generally the rise of indigenism in Kottamurade by looking at people's everyday working lives and changes therein. I will first give some insight into the history of the colony, after which I discuss recent changes in the local political economy and people's apparent reactions to such changes, firstly at the level of the colony as a whole, and then more particularly in terms of the experiences of different people within the colony.

7.1.1 *Kottamurade: Short history of a Paniya colony*

Kottamurade colony is a cramped, muddy, and poverty-stricken rural ghetto housing forty-four families on 2,5 acres of land at the edge of a typically Malayalee "rurban" (sprawling) village of about 30.000 inhabitants[108]. The village in question is known for having been the site of a successful Naxal-led attack in 1968 against the Special Police force that was camped at the village's famous Sita Devi

Kottamurade in the rain

temple to (unsuccessfully) prevent its land being claimed by the thousands of Christian settler farmersfrom Southern Kerala moving into the area. By the 1980s, these settler farmers had also made the village famous for producing some of the finest quality pepper in the world: for its booming cash crop economy the village for a while was known as the "Dubai of Kerala". Though Kottamurade colony is located around the corner of a hill, out of sight from the nearest paved road, it is far from isolated from the rest of the village. All sorts of visitors frequent the colony, from the municipal "tribal promoter", to the doctor and nurses conducting "medical camps" (mostly against TB) in the colony, the "teacher" of the colony's small *anganwadi* (kindergarten), journalists (and myself) following up on stories on the Muthanga struggle, and the Muslim fish seller who drives his motorcycle into the main mud square every other day in search of customers. Also the occasional big-bellied, white-clad landowner or contractor can be seen entering the colony looking for skilled day laborers if such were not to be found at the informal

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[108] To prevent all too facile (google) recognition of the village, I will not mention its name here.

meeting points in the larger towns (Sultan Bathery and Mananthavadi) where many men from Kottamurade travel each morning in the hope of being recruited for the day.

The history of the colony itself is closely tied to the village's: it was during the time when Christians from southern Kerala were claiming land around the villagefrom the temple and feudal landlords - the same time when some of the land-owning tribes in the area (mostly Kurichias and Kurumas) *lost* parts of their land - that the older generation of Paniya now living at Kottamurade for the first time gained a place to stay free from the landlord's threat of eviction. According to the elderly Paniya I talked to, Christian settlers were the first to treat them as "humans" and to oppose bonded labor – out of "Christian" conviction and the desire to hire Paniya labor themselves.[109]In combination with the Naxalite movement, this opened up many possibilities for these Paniya workers and the then *moopan* (chieftain) of a group of workers living in Chiralle – a place about half an hour's walk from the village – decided at this time to join the settlers' colonization efforts and settle with his family on the piece of fallow land that is now called Kottamurade. Having claimed the land and received the *pattayam* (title deed) to it, the *moopan*invited relativesto come and live there. Originally all the people in the colony were relatives, though now through marriage people from outside have come in. These outsiders who came to live in Kottamurade are mostly Paniya from elsewhere but also, as is usually reluctantly acknowledged, people of other "castes" – mostly Pulayas ("SCs") --because of so-called "love marriages" (cross-caste marriages). When coming to the site of Kottamurade, the *moopan's* relatives, together with the Chettys, an "indigenous" but not "ST" community who are now the colony's neighbors, cleared the area of trees and decided to call the colony after a fruit that a type of tree there bore. The Paniya called this type of fruit "kotta" and, according to an elderly Paniya woman I spoke to, offered it to the deities – an act she said was called "murade" in Paniya.The place is hence now known as "Kottamurade colony" ("colony" being the general term used for such residential enclaves).

It is often assumed by outsiders that the *moopan* is the "traditional" chief and lends his authority from ancient adivasi custom. Yet in all likelihood the institution of the*moopan* emerged in the context of the relations of the Paniya to the landlords they worked for. The *moopan* was most probably the person described by Thurston (1909: 64) as "appointed by the Nayar Janmi to look after his interests, and be responsible to him for the other inhabitants of the village". Indeed, Aiyyappan (1992: 80) claims the *moopan* is historically a senior Paniya appointed as the "gang leader" of a group of bonded laborers, "bound loyally to look after the

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[109] A pattern we know from earlier anti-bonded labor campaigns, notably by British colonial administrators and missionaries eager to access labor for their plantations (Kooiman 1989).

interests of the master" (though that is probably an exaggeration of the *moopan's* true loyalties). According to Aiyyappan, these are secular appointments given a "religious colour" through certain ceremonies. It can hardly be a coincidence that the contractors who emerged in the 1930s to recruit rural Scheduled Caste workers for the nearby Nilgiri tea plantations were likewise called *moopans* (Lindberg 2001: 62-63). These *moopans* were often ordinary workers who sought to improve their lot by providing the plantation owner with work hands and workers often ran up debts to the *moopan* (ibid.). It should be no surprise, then, that the living arrangement at Kottamurade is also not one of "communal land" ownership but rather of rent-obligation to the *moopan.*

At the time of its founding in the 1970s, the *moopan's* initiative to found the colony was certainly experienced as a significantly liberating move. Progress was moreover in evidence when the government – as part of its "one lakh housing" (100.000) program -- built *pukka*(proper, concrete) houses on the site. In the stories on their more recent past, people of Kottamurade show no trace of lost glories that "development" may, as some scholars claim, have destroyed. Instead, the older people in Kottamurade will all – often to the surprise of visitors expecting stories of loss and degradation -- tell you that "life is much better now" than it was in their youth. Akkathi, a middle-aged woman from the colony, told me that rather than worry about having access to the forest to dig for tubers as was their "tradition", she was glad she could now buy her food in the stores. As she said, "digging for tubers to eat is hard work, especially after working in the fields all day!" Akkathi much preferred to earn wages and use her government-assigned "Below Poverty Line" (BPL) ration card to get food from the shop. Surely this involved negotiating with the shop owner and sure enough several new families at Kottamurade had not received ration cards yet or were, though desperately poor, not noted as "BPL". The shop owner responsible for the ration cards moreover needed to be constantly pressured to provide the correct ration and used the credit that most people at the colony had to him as a lever. Yet such constant bargaining to get what they needed was taken for granted by most people at Kottamurade and did not create nostalgia for some "pre-development" past.

Following people at Kottamurade in their negotiations with the municipality – during meetings and through the "tribal promoter" assigned to their colony – it was clear that they had been used to putting whatever Kerala's development model had to offer to their advantage. There was no doubt to them about the legitimacy of their demands for instance for a vehicle to be arranged to take the children of the colony to school or for better electricity and lavatories to be built at the colony. In this, the recent history of Kerala's land reforms, minimum wages legislation, public distribution system, and Welfare Boards instituted in the 1970s through the assertion of 'worker's dignity', claiming welfare as 'people's right',seems undeniable. Kerala's

rhetorical emphasis on 'pro-poor' development clearly did not *guarantee* such development—certainly not, as we will see, in the present circumstances—but did enable people to expect further progress towards integration as worker-citizens. But even as such claims on the state continue, they have in the past decade started to be undermined by political-economic processes affecting the working lives of people at Kottamurade – processes that, as we will see, made people more prone to follow other possible routes of emancipation apart from general citizen or worker-oriented political engagement.

7.1.2 *"SUFFOCATION" AND EXPENDABILITY*

When I asked people at Kottamurade directly why they joined the AGMS' Muthanga struggle, their answer was usually plainly: "we needed land". As Chimbren, the first leader of the AGMS in Kottamurade, told me,

> "There was no other way – we would have gone with anyone who came to promise us land" - adding "even with you*chechi* [elder sister]..!".

There were other ways of trying to get land – through political parties or the municipality for instance. Joining the AGMS was not so straight-forward a move since it came with a lot of debate in the colony on whether or not there was a need to reclaim their "traditions", and what this entailed, and whether or not they should organize "autonomously" as adivasis, and what this meant. Yet even after the disastrous break-up of the Muthanga occupation, many people in the colony still passionately advocated the need to organize autonomously as "adivasis". Since purely utilitarian arguments clearly cannot explain why people took this new route, some scholars are tempted to complement such arguments by a cultural-primordialist reading that beneath the discourses of adivasiness that are strategically haggled over, there is another, "authentic" adivasiness that makes it only natural for people to see themselves as adivasis and articulate themselves politically as such. In that case, however, it remains a puzzle why people at Kottamurade did not do so earlier – why a generation ago, they were struggling for higher wages rather than land and why there are still a significant number of people at Kottamurade who are uninterested in talking about "adivasi" rights and simply want to become less "poor". I want to consider the conditions that made day laborers such as those at Kottamurade turn to a politics of indigenism not through utilitarian, nor culturalist, lenses but rather as part of changes in their everyday working lives.

For both those employed as day laborers as well as those employed in the plantation sector, the 1990s were a time of drastically decreasing demand for their labor following the further withdrawal of capital from Kerala and the difficulty of Kerala's agricultural sector to compete

with cheaper products produced elsewhere. Employment provision and welfare schemes moreover were grinding to a halt in the 1990sdue to under-funding and mismanagement. The large majority of peopleat Kottamurade whom I spoke to indicated a marked decline during the past decade in their possibilities of finding work. The only people seen working the few paddy fields around Kottamurade colony itself at the time of my fieldwork were Kattunaikans, another small "adivasi" community who apparently were willing to work for even lower wages than the Paniya (also because they were still more used to trekking into the forest for supplementary food). As a matter of "fact" people at Kottamurade told me "they [Kattunaikans] can work for even 10 rupees less than we do" – there, apparently, were absolute (relational) limits to how far one can compromise while remaining a Paniya. On road and construction works in the area, where Paniya did fetch wages that were still within their dignity, there was however a trend of Tamil migrants being hired. As Akkathi, one of the women at Kottamurade, told me

> "Nowadays they don't even call the Chettys [the wealthier "indigenous" but not ST neighbors whose women were willing to work for very low wages since their husbands were considered the main breadwinners]. Instead they hire people from outside saying that these [the Chettys and the people from Kottamurade] are asking for too much money. They are not calling us for work anymore."

The stress this produces is palpable in Chimbren's words:

> "If we can't find work, we can't have *kanji*(rice soup). If there is no work, we won't have *kanji* at home. We have four or five children here, not only mine, my sister's also. Then mother, father, brothers in law, we all want *kanji. Chechi* [elder sister], I am saying this out of grief…"

Hence while workers at Kottamurade had already been left behind in the course of the 1980s by their upwardly mobile,land-owning neighbors profiting from a booming regional economy in rubber, pepper, and other cash crops at the time, they were in even more trouble when the price of cash crops slumped during the 1990s and the village became known as Kerala's "suicide capital" for the number of farmers committing suicide (Nair and Menon 2007)[110].Debt-ridden farmers could provide even less employment to Paniya workers. Yet whereas the stress of high indebtedness and the threat of loosing all status and property amongst small farmers is more inductive to suicide than other relational forms of distress, it has also been noted that the government has implemented a host of measures to support small farmers but has neglected social security measures for agricultural laborers in this same period. As Mohanakumar (2008) revealed, even the money contributed by agricultural laborers to the Agricultural Workers Welfare Fund Board that was to provide them with a pension was diverted to defray the administrative costs of running the board. Particularly in regions with the highest concentration

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[110] For a compelling analysis of how industrial agriculture and, later, speculative agri-business created the political-economic and environmental context for these farmer suicides see Muenster (2011).

of Scheduled Tribes in Kerala (Wayanad, Idukki, and Palakkad), settlement of due benefits encountered such delays that "a labourer should be considered fortunate if she/he remains alive to avail of the benefit" (Mohanakumar 2008: 28).

While agriculture is in crisis and other sectors are turning to even cheaper sources of labor, the sector that is visibly booming in Wayanad is that of tourism. It is actively promoted as a "growth engine" (Sreekumar and Parayil 2002), hoped to compensate for the collapse of the agricultural and manufacturing sectors. Wayanad has recently been declared a "tourism district" and the number of luxury hotels in the area is visibly on the rise (Jacob 2006: 110). "Adivasi" workers generally have no employment in this sector, though they abstractly figure large as a "tourist attraction". The luxurious Brahmagiri hotel in Manathavadi, the town where the first adivasi *sangam* was held in 1992[111], has a huge picture of an adivasi woman in "traditional" dress in the middle of its patio. The "Jungle Retreat" in Thirunelli, an area known for the large number of so-called "unwed adivasi mothers" whose offspring can often be traced to the military battalion that was stationed there, adorns its homepage with a picture

Adivasi woman on tourism poster

of an exotic-looking "tribal dance" and tells us that "spending time with these people of the forest is an enchanting and fascinating experience." There's a mushrooming of tourism management courses and institutes in Wayanad (Sreekumar and Parayil 2002: 530), few of which enroll adivasis yet none of which fails to focus on the adivasi as attraction (something my "expert" opinion was often solicited on in vain by students from such institutes). Adivasis moreover seem to be an attraction for the film industry that is doing well in Kerala. One day I found the set of the shooting of "*The photographer*", a movie about a photographer of wildlife (and the occasional adivasi), crowded with people from Kottamurade hoping to get a glimpse of Kerala's movie star Mohanlal in a re-enactment of the Muthanga violence. Imaginary "adivasis" figured prominently in Wayanad but most of the actual adivasis were standing by on the sidelines.

In order to make a living, people at Kottamurade – like many adivasis in India (see Breman 1996, Mosse 2005) - were increasingly forced to migrate between their home and places outside of Kerala, particularly to Kodagu (formerly "Coorg"). There they worked on a temporary basis in the privately owned ginger and banana plantations. Many Malayalee farmers or pensioned civil servants were leasing land across the border from local landlords in order to be able to participate in what was almost a casino gamble, considering the fluctuation of prices of ginger

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[111] See chapter 3.1.

and other cash crops. People from Kottamurade would be attracted to work on these plantations through advances given to them (usually between 500 and 1000 rupees) by the labor contractors working for these farmers. Consequently, the contractors would find many ways of not paying them their full wages later on – for instance by selling liquor and withholding the money from their wages, or simply through false book keeping. Only when contractors were all too obviously in violation of norms, could workers run off to go back home before the work was done since being no strangers, the contractors would know where to find the runaway workers. In Kodagu there was a downward pressure on wages for workers from Kerala, partly because of the presence of other migrant workers, but also because the costs of social reproduction of native workers were partly absorbed by their families: they needed only one rather than three meals a day at the plantation since they ate breakfast and dinner at home.

As people in Kottamurade told me, the migration to Kodagu started in the early 90s. Things had become gradually worse. At first they were still able to find work in pepper cultivation in February and March when it was the season. Lately they had to move to Kodagu even in those months. Sometimes wages were negotiated before they mounted the jeeps taking them to Kodagu. At other times, the negotiation happened only on the way.[112] The migration experience was stressful because of the bad working and living conditions at the private plantations outside of Kerala but also because migration is highly stigmatized. Kodagu is generally known as a scary and "immoral" place. The one advantage of migration – the chance to take part in less traditionally regulated, more worldly relationships and circuits of consumption (see Shah 2010: 130 ff.) - is usually interpreted by villagers as adivasi workers going to Kodagu only to buy "jeans" and "silly consumption items" such as "fair and lovely" (whitening) skin cream and to practice "lax morals", to get drunk, and have "affairs". Hence the circular migration adivasi day laborers like those at Kottamurade are forced to engage in further excludes them both literally and metaphorically from proper Malayalee citizenship. People at Kottamurade would often tell me their land occupation at Muthanga was evicted because "people were afraid that if we would own land, we would no longer come to work theirs". Yet in the changing economic context just described, this statement, seems to have a double meaning, pointing not just to their exploitation but also posing a counter-claim to a creeping reality that is worse than that of being exploited: that of being made expendable and no longer being part of local society anymore altogether.

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[112] As the farmers leasing land in Koddagu told me, there is a lot of financial stress on them since the price of leasing land is constantly increasing and stands at more than 30.000 rupees an acre (in 2009) while the price of ginger fluctuates as much as from 2000 to 300 rupees per 60 kilograms. According to these farmers, the ones really benefiting from it all were the large landowners in Karnataka who leased out their land.

The nature of such political-economic processes is also revealed in a metaphor most often used by people at Kottamurade to describe their situation. Their problem was not literal starvation, nor bondage, but being "suffocated". Indeed, what a generation ago was considered progress – living in *pukka* houses erstwhile only permitted to higher caste communities - is increasingly experienced in the way CK Janu generally refers to the founding of these rural ghettoes: as a process of "colonization". "Suffocation" is a product of how the structural processes whereby people are increasingly pushed out of Kerala society, are happening also in miniature –and close on the skin -- in the colony itself. Kottamurade's land is today registered in the name of Vasi, the son of the deceased *moopan*, who himself lives outside of the colony. Inhabitants of Kottamurade all pay rent to Vasi, who also profits from the cash crops grown on part of the land the *moopan* managed to keep uninhabited for that purpose. As Karuppen, one of men of the colony, told me, "this whole colony is under his authority. We all are all living here as coolies."The relation between the *moopan* and the rest of the people at Kottamurade has, as we saw, historically never been founded just on "traditional" consensus. Yet, at present it is under particular strain as tensions around the *moopan's* ownership of the land are escalating in what reflects the wider specter of redundancy haunting the colony.

On the one hand, people in the colony often emphasize their "gratefulness" to the *moopan* for having "allowed" them to live on the land. But they thereby also hint at the traditional obligations that come with their respect for the *moopan*. Vasi, however, seems little interested in such traditional moral claims , or indeed in brokering between the workers at Kottamurade and potential employers -- it is not for nothing that the people of Kottamurade did not recognize Vasi as the new *moopan* when his father died. What Vasi is more interested in is the land on which the houses stand: land that could be used much more profitably than by housing a group of largely unemployed distant relatives. If sold or rented out to others, the land could effectively sustain Vasi's narrow escape from the abject poverty of the colony. This is all the more the case since land in Wayanad has acquired a new value as capital investment for corporate resorts and weekend homes of the urban middle-classes in Bangalore and Kozhikode. Vasi has hence gradually been trying to get people to leave the colony, which people experience as constantly emphasizing the "suffocating" character of their condition. The pressure comes in the form of an increasing unwillingness on the part of Vasi to allow for late payments of rent (whereas earlier the *moopan* was happy to have people indebted to him), which in turn increases tensions within families and often, particularly in the context of alcoholism, provides the spark for fights in the colony. The pressure also comes in the form of forbidding people at Kottamurade to build new huts on the land or even to take up the scheme approved by the municipality to renovate the houses. Chimbren describes the atmosphere in the colony telling me,

> "we can't live here, in this suffocation. ... We can't live here. It is chocking us. ... the house down there... there are six families living in it! We are frustrated. And always we end up in fights..."

Later, more resigned, he adds,

> "We have no other way but to live in this suffocating situation. There are people who drink and there are those who don't. But the fact is that no one can live here. There's more people every day. The number never decreases...".

As the pressure on them in the colony increases, so does the desire of people at Kottamurade to have a piece of land for themselves.

On top of this come changes in the educational landscape that affect people at Kottamurade. Even the Paniya, who are among the very poorest in Kerala, have a literacy rate of about 40 percent for men and 25 percent for women (KIRTADS 2003: 27) – data that are confirmed by my experiences in Kottamurade colony though the gender gap there seems much smaller as women, rather than men, were amongst those most committed to attaining literacy (despite the difficulty of combining this with their other "domestic" and labor obligations). Adults at Kottamurade were first introduced to reading and writing during the Literacy Campaigns of 1980s, which in turn made many people eager to see their children go to school. Though children I spoke to would dream of becoming "teachers", "movie stars", or – particularly popular —"police men", parents say they used to at least hope their children would become educated enough to know their rights, to no longer be treated as ignorants ("as we are", they would often say), and perhaps even make it to being assistant to a shop keeper or a public servant. Yet overcrowded living quarters, nightly family fights, and particularly oft-absent or unemployed parents do not create favorable conditions for children to be motivated for school. In the context of increasing unemployment and educational inflation, parents are moreover increasingly considering their erstwhile hopes for their children mere illusions. While some parents continue all the more to struggle for their children's education – keeping the *anganwadi* (kindergarten) running, pressuring the municipality for a vehicle to bring the children to school, making their children promise they won't skip classes – the hope of general, steady emancipation that education held out for a short while has all but dissolved. Many people I spoke to at Kottamurade were torn between extremes when envisioning their children's future, hoping they may make it big through diligent study yet usually expressing the more cynical view that school was at best a place where their children could get a free lunch. This is hardly surprising since not a single child in the colony has yet managed to pass the school-leaving exam, which in itself is no longer enough to acquire any kind of semi-skilled job in contemporary Kerala. People at Kottamurade know well that public schooling, just like public

health care, is only a façade these days: to have access to real schooling and proper health care, you need money to pay private tutors and visit doctors after-hours.

Being made increasingly expendable in their traditional role as agricultural workers, being pushed off the land they still could at least come home to from long periods of seasonal migration elsewhere, and having few prospects of their children being able to integrate with others around them through proper education,all made people at Kottamurade more receptive to the idea of acquiring a piece of land of their own somewhere and organizing to live "autonomously", apart from the rest of Kerala society. These same processes contributed to the growing popularity of seeing their difference to others in terms of their "adivasi" identity and the desire to "reclaim" this identity and save it from its present "suffocation". These changes in people's everyday working lives, which in turn shape their outlook on the world, best explain why Kottamurade's inhabitants became motivated to gather their few belongings and move to Muthanga in 2003. After the violent eviction of the Muthanga land occupation, some people in Kottamurade – such as Manju – have moreover become ever more convinced of an "adivasi" interpretation of their situation. Yet others, such as Thankamma, moved in the opposite direction. In the following section, I will follow the experiences of these two prominent women at Kottamurade to study people's conditioning towards indigenism at a more personal level.

7.1.3 *DIVERGENT PATHWAYS OF BELONGING*

The eviction of their land occupation at Muthanga was a traumatic experience for the people of Kottamurade, most of whom had brought with them virtually everything they owned only to see it all destroyed. Many walked for days to escape the police and locals willing to denounce them, all the way from Muthanga back to Kottamurade. Some of them were injured so badly that they sustained lasting handicaps. Two men were tortured in jail and only came back weeks later. One of them returned in such bad health he died soon after, while the other, Manju's husband, continued to be summoned to the local magistrate every month. Many of the local landlords had started hiring other, migrant workers while the people of Kottamurade were at Muthanga, which made it difficult for them to find any work at all on their return. Children, meanwhile, were refused back to school under the pretence that they had "skipped" too many classes.The aftermath of Muthanga was one of total loss. Yet how this had come about and how to continue were topics on which opinions were divided. Two people who were particularly outspoken in their differences were Manju and Thankamma, both literate women in their late twenties, each

chairing one of the two "*kudumbamsree*" (family luck/prosperity) female micro-financegroups in the colony.[113] In the following paragraphs I zoom in on the stories of these two women, treating them to some extent as "ideal-typical" cases, the one of the conditions leading to an embracement of indigenist politics, the other of the trajectory of rejecting indigenism.

I first must note, though, that not all people at Kottamurade neatly follow either the indigenist or anti-indigenist paths of Manju and Thankamma respectively. Many people occupy a more ambiguous middle position that demonstrates both the contingencies and the structural determinants involved. Thankamma's friend Vellichi for instance is generally inclined towards skepticism regarding their participation in the AGMS, which is probably not coincidental with the fact that, even more so than Thankamma, she already has something of a solid foothold in Kerala society as she owns a small plot of land adjacent to the colony. The reason she owns this land is rather contingent, and to some extent of her own doing: after her first husband died, she had an "affair" with a farmer living nearby and gave birth to a son. Being thereby an "unwed mother", and having three brothers and a women's organization willing to help her claim her rights through a court case, she managed to receive a considerable sum of money from the farmer, which she used to buy apiece of land from the *moopan*.

Vellichi on her plot adjacent to Kottamurade

Chimbren, who was the first leader of the AGMS at Kottamurade before Manju took over, on the other hand is much more inclined towards indigenism and pessimistic about the possibility of sustaining a decent living by staying at Kottamurade. This in turn does not seem to be coincidental with the fact that he is forced to spend months on end at Koddagu and other plantations outside of Kerala in order to sustain his family—in the process of which he lost his erstwhile public role in the colony. Unlike Thankamma and Vellichi, Chimbren moreover has not received any form of financial support from either the municipality or through neighbors and is often desperate about being able to provide for his family. The improbability of his integration as a worker-citizen made Chimbren more inclined towards a radically different, "adivasi" vision of his future, though he also resorts to other venues of possible relief, such as listening to Bible readings on the radio and heavy drinking.

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[113] These *kudumbamsree* projects were part of a state-wide campaign initiated in 1991.

Thankamma, whose story I will look at more closely, runs a tiny shop in the colony, selling rice, soap, and other basics, right beside the *anganwadi* (kindergarten) that she works for as assistant to the "teacher". As an assistant she earns a salary of a mere 500 rupees per month (about 9 EUR) from the municipality. Yet, as this is a steady job that gives her access to public connections and information about government support programs, she in fact manages to be significantly better off than most people in the colony. She had her two daughters – of 6 and 8 years old at the time of my fieldwork in 2006 - both enrolled in the new government savings project for girl children[114], which will ensure a sum of money becomes available to them at age 18. She moreover arranged a government-subsidized health insurance for her family through the *kudumbamsree*(the women's micro-finance group) and had some money in the bank. She interacts a lot in her daily work with people outside the colony and is particularly close to some of the Christian neighbors, which may partly be because Thankamma grew up an orphan. Thankamma's parents both died of diseases (jaundice and TB) when she was still young and it were her brothers that brought her up. Her elder brother managed to acquire a job in a local shop and over time invested in a small plot of land about 100 meters outside of the colony, where Thankamma was planning to build a house for herself someday too. Till that time, she and Lalu, her husband, and her two daughters however continued to live in a small home in the colony. Lalu went out every day to try and find *cooli panni* (day labor) while both of Thankamma's children, under her constant monitoring, seemed to attend school regularly. Thankamma and Lalu nevertheless decided to join the others to go to Muthanga as they looked forward to building up a less precarious existence and were uncertain about the possibility of indeed living on the land that Thankamma's brother had been acquiring.

Manju, who married into the colony, and her husband Dasen in contrast had no less than five generations living under their roof. At the time of my fieldwork they had three young children, though at the time of Muthanga they only had one daughter. During my fieldwork, this eldest daughter had just reached school-going age but during school time was mostly found roaming the nearby paddy fields with other kids from Kottamurade. Living next to the kindergarten and the shop, Manju keeps an eye on Thankamma's activities but is also herself well-connected to the municipality, amongst others in her role as chair of the other *kudumbamsree*. During *panchayat* (municipal) meetings – since the "people's planning campaign" of the 1990s a regular feature of the Kerala landscape - Manju often is the first to speak up and is much less shy than Thankamma to voice her opinions in public. Both Manju and Dasen live off *cooli panni* (day

labor) and often spend weeks in Koddagu, over the border with Tamil Nadu, to work in the ginger plantations there. Manju is however not eager to admit this and immediately adds that men and women at Koddagu

> "always have separate places to sleep.....and if there aren't any separate places, then our men will assure that they will sleep separately anyway".

Unhappy with and stigmatized by this migratory existence, both Manju and Dasen were eager to build up an "adivasi" lifeon a piece of land to call their own. They got into contact with C K Janu through the organization that initially used to organize literacy campaigns in the colony and eventually became the local leaders of the AGMS at Kottamurade. They visited C K Janu a number of times to receive political "classes" and also organized for the AGMS in a number of other colonies[115] in preparation of Muthanga.

Whereas Manju led the preparations for Muthanga and took on a leadership position during the occupation, Thankamma left for Muthanga hesitantly, worried about leaving behind her small shop, her steady job in the kindergarten, her good connections to neighbors, and indeed her children's school.Soon enough, tensions between Manju and Thankamma erupted at Muthanga. Thankamma – as others from Kottamurade who had been less intensely involved in the preparations – could not understand why the leaders had selected a Wildlife Sanctuary for them to claim land at. Living under the threat of wild elephants with no running water or shops let alone schools in sight was about the last thing they had hoped for. Thankamma also complained to me that Manju and Dasen suddenly "changed into different persons than they were in the colony". With some rhetorical excess she claimed,

> "Here [at Kottamurade] nobody will dominate the other. When we reached there, Dasan and Manju were there to dominate and rule us. What we said was not given any importance; what they said was considered important. That had to be obeyed. We were not ready for it. We went there for land, not to live like their slaves...".

A conflictmoreover developed over the issue of "adivasi" traditions. Thankamma describes how one day she was told by the AGMS leaders that she was to give up going to church and should stick to her original "adivasi" deities. This upset her as she was used to going to church and to temples and had no desire to "go back to the old traditions" -- she and most people in the colony considered themselves people of "many faiths". Thankamma felt looked down upon by the leaders and eventually claimed she preferred to live surrounded by Christian farmers than in an "adivasi" community such as that of Muthanga. Tensions further intensified when some of the children at Muthanga fell ill and Thankamma had wanted to leave the occupation to get health care for them:

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[115] They also tried to organize Manju's native colony, which however stayed with the CPI(M) instead.

> "One day we had picked a quarrel with Dasen and Manju. All our children were having some or other kind of illness. Perhaps because of the climate… Children were infected with scurf. And also cold and fever…. we went and told them that our children are sick and some of us will go out to get medicines for them. Then they…that was not ok with them. They asked us not to go out!"

Considering the rivalry between Manju and Thankamma it should not surprise us that Manju relished the fact that at Muthanga she became the more influential of the two – nor is it surprising that Thankamma was particularly sensitive about this. Thankamma's frustrationsand the tensions that were developing at Muthanga should, however, be contextualized as foremost the result of the leadership's difficult task of sustaining the occupation against the backdrop of fierce opposition: political parties afraid of the rise of a new political movement as well as local notables preoccupied with adivasi workers becoming all too assertive and taking over the land they used to consider theirs. As I described in chapter 3, the way they did so, by focusing on the "authenticity" of the participants' "adivasi" identity, moreover, intensified tensions amongst leaders and participants in the occupation. Understandably under such circumstances, AGMS leaders felt the pressure to "educate" participants in ways of conforming to the discourse of authentic indigenism they had become trapped in – and to stay put to defend the occupied land in case of attack. They tried to keep people to the ideal of living in a self-sustaining, self-organized community rather than venturing out for government services or day labor. As the outside threats to the occupation increased, one can easily imagine the pressures within the land occupation becoming intense.

On February 19th, 2003, after almost two months of living at Muthanga, the occupation was violently evicted. Most people of Kottamurade were camped some distance from the direct frontline and hence most of them escaped the worst of the violence. They did, however, lose all they took with them to Muthanga. On his way back to Kottamurade, Dasen – Manju's husband – was caught by a group of local people and handed over to the police. They tortured him and held him – and his young daughter – in the central district jail for over two months. Manju, on returning to Kottamurade, fell ill and was unable to go for work for a long time, leaving the household dependent on the income that Dasen's mother could contribute as household servant to one of the neighboring families – a job that she particularly resented as even though less back-breaking than planting rice, servant work is extremely low-paying and informal and rather than working in groups, one works alone as the "personal slave" of household's matriarch. Manju hardened her resolve to fight to attain a piece of land on which to live the kind of dignified, autonomous life that she had come to associate with "adivasi" culture. One of the actions she undertook after Muthanga was to stand as a candidate during the local elections – not in the vain hope of actually winning the elections but:

"to makea point: that we adivasis will only give our vote to parties that work for us, that we can withhold our vote if we wish to".

When I visited her again in 2009, it struck me that she had since decorated her home with "tribal" patterns I had not seen anywhere in the colony before. Manju moreover did not see Muthanga purely as a failure and looked forward to a new opportunity of claiming adivasi land. She took pride in having participated in the struggle and saw the renewed attention that Kottamurade colony was getting by that time from the municipality as victories of the AGMS.

Manju's home

Thankamma looked back to Muthanga with a lot more bitterness even though she escaped the violence relatively unscarred as her elder brother, having heard of the impeding police assault, had come to take her family away from Muthanga just in time. A number of NGOs that had come to Kottamurade after Muthanga to hand out blankets and clothes moreover helped restart the *anganwadi* (kindergarten) and the municipality sped

Thankamma's home

up Thankamma's application for a housing grant that would allow her to build a *pukka* house on the land her brother had acquired. When I visited Thankamma again in 2009 the house had been completed and she now lived outside of the colony, though still working there in the shop and the kindergarten. Where Manju's walls had become decorated in "tribal" patterns, pictures of Jesus had come to decorate those of Thankamma. Her daughters were diligently attending school and there was a strikingly different atmosphere in her composed nuclear-family two-child home than there was in Manju's household in the colony where children ran in and out and looked like they had more exciting things to spend their childhood on than school. Unlike Manju's hardening indigenist resolve, the experience of Muthanga had led Thankamma to no longer want to have anything to do with "adivasi" politics.

One of the developments after Muthanga was that to honor its commitments to redistributing land to landless adivasis and under pressure from the AGMS, the government had proposed distributing land at Aralam farm – a 7000-acre government-owned farm about nine hours by bus from Kottamurade colony. Ironically, from the point of view of the indigenist discourse of adviasi "homelands", it was not Manju but Thankamma who was fiercely opposed to the idea of moving too far away from her native place, where all the connections through which she

sustained her family were and where her children were going to school. Thankamma was moreover suspicious that all this talk of "adivasis" was in fact a "game" set up to "exploit" them. This was confirmed to her even more since the tourism boom in the area had picked up steam and women in all kinds of "adivasi" dress could be seen decorating hotel billboards. Whereas Manju claimed this was part of the victory of the AGMS in redeeming adivasi culture and making people proud to be adivasi, Thankamma saw it as an attempt to portray them as "animals of the forest" and wanted nothing to do with it.

To conclude the story of Kottamurade – as an example of the conditions under which adivasi day laborers turned to indigenism in the course of the 1990s – we can see how particularly those people at Kottamurade who most intensely experienced the process of being made into what Jan Breman (1996) calls "footloose" laborers or "wage hunter-gatherers", became attracted to indigenist solutions. The "specter of absolute redundancy" (Breman 1996) -- or what because of their ultimate function as a reserve army of labor I prefer to call "absolute expediency" -- seems to have played a crucial role in preparing the colony as a whole, and certain people in it more than others, to become attracted to the politics of indigenism. It motivated people to start envisioning their future apart from Kerala society and interpret their past as having been just that. As similar pressures worked to push people not just out of the realm of proper Malayalee citizenship but even literally off the land where their homes were located, the attraction of occupying a piece of land of their own and starting an "adivasi" life grew. Rather than being able to "integrate" in society through stable employment and secure rights to education as "workers", the ideal of owning a piece of land is that one can do without such fading social institutions and instead organize an "adivasi" way of life on one's own. In the course of participating in the actions of the AGMS and experiencing violent repression and further exclusion as adivasis, some people in Kottamurade, moreover, came to cherish the vision of indigenism even more strongly. Others, who still considered avenues of integration open to them, however, started to become skeptical of the adivasi movement and placed renewed hopes on strategies of integration. In this way, an expanded class perspective rather than one of strict rational self-interest or cultural histories best captures the diverging pathways of belonging of people at Kottamurade and provides an answer to what kind of conditions – in combination with the kind of wider political dynamics discussed in part II of this dissertation - encouraged people to join the AGMS's vision of their pasts and futures as depending not on class struggle but adivasi assertion.

7.2   (DIS)POSSESSION AMONGST ADIVASI PLANTATION WORKERS

The story of Kottamurade showed the trajectory towards indigenism of people depending on day labor, primarily in the agricultural sector, and the impact of the "specter of expediency" they were being faced with. The following stories are closely related: the people whose experiences I discuss here are likewise manual laborers in agriculture. Yet they differ in one aspect: these workers used to have fixed employment in the cash crop plantations in Wayanad. They had a guaranteed number of days of work per week and a free place to live in the plantations' workers' quarters. Yet also this type of adivasi workers are increasingly faced with the specter of expediency following the collapse of the plantation sector in the course of the 1990s. The collapse is partly related to diminishing subsidies and mismanagement in government plantations as Kerala's budget deficit reached record levels in the late 80s, forcing Kerala's government to turn to the Asian Development Bank and abide by its conditions of cutting spending. Yet almost all plantations in Wayanad, including privately owned ones, in fact got into trouble in the course of the 1990s due to the collapse of the price of cash crops. This, in turn, was related to the disintegration of the USSR that made the US no longer eager to sustain international trade agreements on quotas to regulate prices, particularly of tea and coffee (Neilson and Pritchard 2009).

Almost all of the projects set up as so-called "tribal rehabilitation" projects in earlier decades to provide employment to ex-bonded adivasis, including the Cheengeni coffee project (founded in 1958), the Sugandagiri Cardamom Project (1978) and the Girijan Collective Farming Cooperative (1979), are now defunct (Wayanad Initiative 2006: 10). Of government-run estates in Wayanad it is only the Priyadarshini Tea Estate that is still running, yet it does so at a loss, has not paid wages it owes its workers, and uses less than half of its hectares. The Sugandagiri and Pookkot farms have been entirely disbanded and the land distributed amongst its erstwhile workers. Many claim that this is "owing to the demand from tribal organizations" (Wayanad Initiative 2006: 132) but this is, as we will see, somewhat misleading. What the stories I present here emphasize in particular -- and more clearly than the stories of people at Kottamurade -- is how older working regimes crumbled and with them the basis for class-based, unionist politics.

7.2.1   *"WE CAN COMPLAIN PERHAPS….BUT THERE'S NO ONE WHO WILL HEAR IT!"*

The Sugandagiri ("Fragrant Hill") project was set up in 1978, in the wake of Indira Gandhi's "Eliminate Poverty" campaign. The latter's 20 point program also included another formal abolition of bonded labor and the project was designed to employ and "rehabilitate" ex-bonded

adivasi laborers. They would be given the chance to integrate as full citizens in society with steady employment in cooperative cultivationunder the supervision of the Wayanad Cooperative Farming Society. The project was assigned 1500 hectares of forestland – land that many of these same adivasis used earlier to supplement the meager diet provided to them by the landlords they were tied to. While destroying this safety net for adivasis, the clearing of the forest also provided them with work. Eventually 850 hectares of cardamom, 133 of hectares of coffee and 160 hectares of pepper were planted at Sugandagiri. In all, the project provided work and accommodation to about 750 adivasi families – mostly Paniyas though also quite a few Kurichiyas and Pulayas (SCs). The project was not initially intended for these latter groups, since they had not been bonded laborers, but they came in when Paniya families dropped out, for instance when not having enough reserves to manage monthly rather than daily wages. Finally in the course of the 1990s, Sugandagiri started to run at a heavy loss and by 2003 the project was disbanded and the land allocated to 438 families, each adivasi family receiving 5 acres of land while dalit families received 1 acre. This is the abbreviated history as it is generally known in Kerala. Yet the story of how and why the project was parceled up rather than given support to continue is not so well known.

The first hint at the underlying story I got when I visited Sugandagiri and asked one of the workers I met on my way whether he was adivasiand whether I could speak to him. With an air of cynicism he retorted:

> "Adivasi? I don't know about that. You should probably speak to K V Raman. He seems to know exactly who adivasis are."

As he pointed me to K V Raman's home and walked on, he hesitated and added:

> "But actually you should talk to Paniyas – we are the real adivasis…"

It turned out K V Raman was the leader of the "Samara Samithi" (Struggle Committee), the organization that had led the strikes that had been taking place at Sugandagiri to force the government to parcel up the farm and redistribute the land to adivasis. Raman belonged to the Kurichiya "tribe", most of whom were traditionally – and still are – land-owning and many of whom are now well-educated. From my interview with Raman on the veranda of his comfortably large house -- in the middle of the banana fields he was cultivating – I learned that though his family used to support the Communist party, Ramanhad been a member of Congress since 1984. The first thing Raman emphasized to me during the interview was that the Sugandagiri project "was given to the adivasis by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi". He said that ever since the start of the project they had been told they would get 5 acres of land and had agitated for it but gotten no support from the government.

> "It was only when this wage crisis came, when people were starving and the government had run out of funds that the government started listening. But still somehow they managed to pay out wages by collecting from some other tribal fund. It is mostly the upper-caste staff that benefits from this – workers get only 500 rupees or so while the officials here get 10.000 rupees..".

On top of policies increasingly less favorable to supporting government-subsidized cooperative farms, the rise of the AGMS itself also contributed to Raman's success in finally getting the demand for the estate to be parceled up heard:

> "In 2001 C K Janu also came with a strike program and managed to have an agreement with Anthony [the then Chief Minister]. Then the government also decided to redistribute the land here to adivasis. But due to the opposition of some officials and other parties there was some delay..".

In reaction to the delay, Raman's organization decided to go to the High Court and finally got the order that the cooperative society was to be dismissed. As Raman says,

> "We didn't want a cooperative in which we don't have representatives. We want land, nothing else".

Finally the land got distributed amongst the workers and plots were assigned through a lottery system.

> "There was a box with plot numbers, that's how people got their plot. There was no malpractice, just an open system".

There was, however, some room for negotiation as some people had invested in the plot where they had already been living. That room for negotiation, I later discovered, seemed to have been just enough for almost all the good land ending up with the Kurichiyas. Raman, meanwhile, had turned to the struggle for infrastructure since without this it was impossible to properly cultivate the land. He legitimized the struggle particularly in terms of those adivasi workers whose land – unlike his own – remained uncultivable because of a lack of facilities:

> "Under the Sugandagiri project the idea was not just land redistribution but also roads, facilities, irrigation, electricity….the situation of some of the adivasis up in the hills is really pathetic, they are getting no government aid at all".

Apart from struggling for better infrastructure at the defunct Sugandagiri plantation, Ramanhad also become the Wayanad district president of the Kerala Adivasi Congress and hoped to continue his struggle not just for adivasis at Sugandagiri but all over Kerala.

The Paniya and Pulaya (SC) workers I spoke to, however, were often skeptical of the way the struggle had been waged and over its outcome. It turned out that most of them had initially demanded that the government step in to call the management of the project to order and give financial support so that workers would continue to get at least four days of work a week. Many workers continued to work in the plantation, even though they had not been paid wages for months, in order to build up pressure on the government to continue the project and to lay a

moral claim to receiving the wages. The block of workers demanding the project to continue to provide employment was initially strong. Yet as the strike dragged on, many families had to leave the estate because they could not do without wages for so long. Since those who left were mostly those who had nothing to fall back on and who had belonged to the block demanding wages and employment rather than land, this block was gradually weakened. The block of workers demanding the project to be parceled up into individual plots meanwhile was gaining support and had started to claim that all along the project's actual aim had been not to provide employment but land to adivasis. The SCs working on the estate, most of whom were more interested in being employed in the estate and living on a small plot near the roadside than on receiving a piece of land to live on and farm somewhere in the interior of the project, at that point decided to split off from the adivasi workers altogether as they realized they would in any case have a different legal right. As one of the Pulaya (SCs) men who did stay on and eventually received 1 acre of land (as opposed to the 5 acres most STs got):

> "Suddenly there came this rumor that the government considers SCs as a forward caste, so they might not give us land. That's when we decided to fight separately as dalits".

With an eye on one of the Paniya men standing nearby he added however

> "Dalit includes all the adivasis. It just means an organization for all lower-caste people. All adivasis come under the umbrella term dalit. Dalit stands for lower-caste people, see compared to Paniyas, Kurichiyas are forward".

Eventually there were only about 450 of the original 750 families left at Sugandagiri and even those who had initially struggled to keep the project running saw their demand was hopeless and eventually joined the call to divide up the land. One of the Paniya women tells me

> "All this 5 acres story is organized by this Raman. But we were having problems all this time and some people started thinking if we stop working and give in to this 5 acre story we will at least get the provident fund. Because there were so many wage problems arising. So people supported the 5-acres-of-land man. All those who demanded 1 acre and 4 days of work got isolated. Actually life here was good, we had work, we had maternity leave, we had insurance, allowance, clothes, blankets. Then all of a sudden this man comes up with a 5 acres story and exploits the wage crisis. It was a crisis, but it was manageable. Look at the [managerial] staff, they are still working and getting salary....".

The tensions that had been building up during the years of mismanagement and later the strike had made most of the workers weary of a collective undertaking and favorably inclined toward receiving an individual plot instead. Yet, as, Prabhagan, one of the Paniya workers still at Sugandagiri, told me:

> "when finally the strike was settled, almost all the forward adivasis [Kurichiyas] got fertile lands – Paniyas and Kattunayikans got worthless lands so we're all living in a pathetic condition now. But we can't complain…. we can complain perhaps but there's noone who will hear it!"

The land most Paniyas and Kattunaikans ended up with was officially still forestland and so they were not given titles to it, only a certificate of possession. Even if they would be able to buy the resources needed to work the land and somehow get it irrigated, they would be officially forbidden to do so by the forest department. The latter was even preventing them from felling the trees on the plots they supposedly owned:

> "They are not letting us cut anything. We need to go out for *cooli panni* (day labor) to survive. At least if we were allowed to work the land perhaps the next generation could make a living from it…".

In airing their frustration at this situation, many Paniyas and Kattunaikans employed the discourse of indigenism that had become hegemonic in the course of the struggle. The words of one of the Paniya workers I spoke to were rather revealing

> "We Paniya became [sic] adivasis because we are the primitive people, we came here first. Sugandagiri was intended for Paniyas and Kattunaikans but now Kurichias are getting all the best land. But you should not think we can talk about being adivasi, we are the least aware of what this project was really intended for. We just know one thing: in order to eat we need to work."

With some vengefulness, one of the Paniya workers who was originally in favor of demanding work rather than land told me:

> "People became divided in two: the ones who wanted land, and those who wanted work. Now after they got land, they have started thinking it would have been better to have work."

A Pulaya (SC) woman, with tears in her eyes, describes the internal conflicts that have arisen once the decision was made to distribute the land:

> "I have been working here for 28 years and now I get 1 acre of land, on top of a hill, with no irrigation, impossible to cultivate. So we demanded land with an irrigation facility, we approached the collector and he promised us 10 cents somewhere else. But he never gave us the title and anyway, other people are living there! So now these people who got 5 acres of land are teasing those who received 1 acre of land. And on that 10 cents we got, another family is living there – that man owns 5 acres and he will be pestering us. The day before yesterday we had a huge quarrel with him [cries as she speaks]. This man planted coffee on the land.. actually he had been living there for a long time already but now the authorities designated it to be redistributed to the SCs. This Kuruma ["forward" adivasi] got 5 acres of land elsewhere but it is bad land. So he has been searching out those who were assigned his land [the land he lives on now] and has started to pester them. We are still only living in the workers' quarters".

7.2.2 *"THEN THE PROMISE CAME THAT ADIVASIS WOULD BE GIVEN LAND.."*

The strike and subsequent parceling up of Sugandagiri, one of the largest government-run cooperatives in Kerala, sent a clear signal to other plantations in crisis. Many of the activists I interviewed at other occupied plantations mentioned Sugandagiri and how it led political

parties and organization to focus on occupying land for adivasi workers. At plantation "Seventy-three", I interviewed Api, a Kattunaikan worker at the (ex-)plantation and leading activist in the occupation initiative. About 200 Paniya and Kattunaikan families were occupying the 250 acre plantation and had agreed that the 60 or so original workers of the project would all get 2 acres each, while adivasis who had not worked there but joined from a colony nearby would get 1 acre.

As Apiexplained to me:

> "The problems at this plantation were getting worse. We were laborers at this plantation. Actually this plantation was set up by the government for our good. But they [plantations management] were being reluctant to give us the workers' concessions that the labor law provides – like the provident fund, medical aid, wages even...only five, eight or ten working days were available per month. When we asked for our Onam [Kerala's main holiday] bonus they would not give it in time. Then we *gherao*-ed [encircled] them. We seized their office. After that the collector and the police interfered to sanction all those concessions to us. And then we realized that in this plantations we would not get much work and we would not be able to improve our living conditions. So at that critical juncture we occupied the land.More so, if we didn't seize the land, other organizations would occupy it... there was the strike going on in Muthanga and before that, in Sugandagiri, a plantation was given to adivasis. So we occupied it all [their plantation] because we didn't want other organizations like AKS or Gothra Maha Sabha to seize the land. More so, we have no land of our own and we had a feeling that if we get land, things will be better...."

Hence a strike that had began as one to demand the plantation fulfill its obligations to its employees – triggered by the decline of the plantation economy – gradually, against the background of the wider political dynamics of the rise of the AGMS, transformed into a land strike. As Api told me:

> "There was no clash with the police here. Actually, this project is modeled after the Sugandagiri project. When we *gherao*-ed the field assistants the district collector came with a lot of [police] vehicles. We thought they would beat us black and blue. But the collector took the decision then to sell the pepper harvest and distribute our benefits. At that time as far as my understanding is concerned it was a strike, like Janu's strike in Muthanga – we could have held it anywhere, including in front of the secretariat. But then the promise came that adivasis would be given land..".

The symbolic land occupation had become a real land occupation.

Api's story clearly signals the way the difficulty of demanding employment and workers benefits in combination with a trend set in by the redistribution of Sugandagiri's land amongst adivasis, led workers at other plantations like this one to also raise the demand for adivasi land. At the same time, the problems that arose at Sugandagiri also existed at plantation Seventy-three. Since the initial occupation they held was intended to be symbolic and a way to claim their wages and benefits rather than to redistribute the land, little conscious effort had been made to divide the land fairly. Now the ones who happened to have set up in a fertile part of the plantation were much better off that those who got struck with less productive areas. There was talk of trying to

get those who had more productive pieces of land to share their profit with others but the problem was that whenever a formal meeting was called by a district collector or other authority to negotiate on the plantation, it were those who already had the better pieces of land who could afford the transportation charges and hence solidify their position. As Api complained,

"They won't provide a penny for those with less productive land".

At Marianade estate, another occupied plantation in the area, the CPI(M)'s Adivasi Kshema Samithi was confronting the issue of what to do with a similar plantation in crisis where the adivasi workers were a minority – where most other workers were Christian settlers. They had dealt with it by dividing the estate in two, having ST workers and adivasis from nearby colonies claim one half of the land while on the other half of the land the original (mostly non-adivasi) workers clamored for compensations and in the meantime lived on and cultivated the land. Most of the Christian workers I spoke to were primarily concerned with financing their children's education in Kozhikode (the nearest city) and doing so through the forced retirement benefits they expected to receive from the government as they would buy them out to redistribute the plantation's land amongst landless adivasis. The AKS leader managing the occupation – a settler from a nearby Christian neighborhood -- was eager to stress the cultural difference between the adivasis and the Christians at the plantation:

"They have a very different culture, they are the primitive people of this place,
government should buy the land for them. Have you heard them at night playing their
drums?".

On the "workers-side" (the non-adivasi side), there were also those belonging to a community of Kunduvadians, who used to be STs but had recently been taken off the ST list. Theirs was an all the more complicated situation since they were lobbying to get back onto the ST list to access ST quota in education and civil service but at the same time were on the non-adivasi side of the land occupation.

At the adivasi side of the Marianade plantation, there were people from many different "tribes" (Urali, Mullu Kuruma, Paniya) and moreover from many different parts of Wayanad, encouraged by the AKS to come and occupy the plantation. Mostly it was only one member of each household that could be found at the plantation itself, the others being away in Kodagu (Karnataka) or other further away places in order to find work. Usually it was a sickly member of the household who could not work anyway who could be found occupying the land which, in combination with the lack of facilities and lack of experience and resources to continue cultivating the coffee plantation, gave the adivasi side of the occupation a rather bleak atmosphere. One of the few "complete" families I met there was an Urali family living off the AKS' occasional support. Their son had a serious accident when working for a building

contractor and could no longer work while the man and woman were too old to work. All other children they had were dead. A Paniya woman, Thankammana, was the local AKS leader and one of the few healthy people I met at the site. Her husband however had chest pain and therefore was unable to work -- they sustained themselves by collecting wood and other material from the plantation and selling it as well asby receiving some support through the AKS. Even for Thankamma, however, the last time she remembered having had enough to eat was in jail: when they just started the occupation and the police came and kept them in custody for two months. Life is hard at the plantation, she admits: just a week ago her neighbor had a baby but it died after a few days because they had no money to go to the hospital. The mere mentioning of Koddagu inspires her with fear – it's a place where people return from with diseases, or never return from! Unlike the stories the Christian AKS leader told me, Thankammana saw little cultural difference between adivasis and others. "Adivasisi are the poor ones", she tells me. Yet every time she mentions Koddagu, she emphasizes

"It's better if adivasis live on their own, without interference from others..".

What we can see from the Sugandagiri plantation and other occupied plantations in Wayanad is hence on the one hand how the collapsing plantation economy and the government's inability – and perhaps unwillingness – to step in to keep cooperative plantations running, led to a gradual shift in workers' demands from employment to land. This can hardly be considered the victorious coming of age of an "adivasi" wish to re-possess "their" land, nor is it the most useful outcome for all concerned. Instead, in each case we see initial differences in wealth, which were kept in balance through employment in a joint, cooperative project, become enlarged as soon as individual ownership again becomes the primary basis from which to earn a living (or not). While the relatively more resourceful adivasi families (mostly of Kurichia or Kuruma background) start embracing indigenism because they it resonated with their desire to "reclaim adivasi land", poorer adivasi ex-plantation workers, who are forced back into a life of day labor and migration, face the same specter of expediency that people at Kottamurade have been living under. Seeing no other venues for integrating into Kerala society as worker-citizens anymore – and moreover being increasingly humiliated because of the hardship that comes with circular migration and further impoverishment – indigenism seems to attract this latter category of workers primarily for the vision of a more autonomous "adivasi" life it promises, away from the everyday hardship of being an expedient part of the local economy.

7.3   CONCLUSION

In the nineteenth century, Travancore (the southern part of what is now Kerala) was frequently labeled "The Model State". It was not human development organizations who gave it that label then but British administrators, impressed by the Travancore government's exceptionally lenient attitude towards planters' efforts to acquire land, control labor, and make the local state bear its infrastructural costs (Baak 1997). In other words, Kerala was a model in facilitating corporate profits at the expense of investments in general well-being. Luckily, the epithet "model state" in reference to Kerala by now has come to signify the opposite. Nonetheless, as we have seen in part III of this dissertation, a crisis of the egalitarian model is palpable, not just in figures on government spending and Gini Coefficients but also in the everyday experiences of people. Though it might seem logical to interpret the rise of indigenism in this same context of people's anxieties about how to sustain themselves against the background of this crisis, most commentators look only at the current position of adivasis at the bottom of the social and economic hierarchy of Kerala and conclude that their uprising must be about the Kerala model having bypassed them altogether.

I have argued, instead, that it is precisely the changes coming in the "post-reform" period of Kerala's model of development that have – in interaction with political dynamics discussed in part II -- not just triggered but also shaped a new wave of resistance focusing on issues of pride, identity, autonomy, and land. It was not automatic, for instance, that the difficulties adivasis experienced in an increasingly commercialized educational field would lead to an emphasis on ST quotas and "adivasi" identity rather than a movement to resist the rise of private schools, allowing "adivasis" to remain unmarked, "secular" citizens. It was only when the momentum of private education seemed irresistible considering the general direction of political-economic change in Kerala – but also again since resistance against it was led by a no longer credible "Communist" party – that many middle-class "adivasis" started rediscovering their "roots". It was likewise not automatic that the collapse of the cooperative plantation sector would lead to the call for adivasi land rights rather than for government intervention to restore these cooperatives' role of providing employment. The emphasis on land only came with the defeat of the latter demand due to the structural constraints on the government to continue such employment provision, interacting with the political dynamics discussed in the previous chapter where the provision of employment and wage strikes became associated with a political party that had clearly run its course as representative of the poor.

This is a class analysis but not one intending to reproduce the Communist party's line. Indeed, as we saw in part II, this would probably imply arguing that indgenism is a problem of activist

leaders "misleading" their followers and promoting a form of "false consciousness". What a relational or "expanded" class analysis does instead is show that it is not just the kind of political dynamics studied in part II that have given rise to indigenism, but that this process has been structurally conditioned by changes in people's every-day experiences in making a living. With such a focus, it becomes all too clear that despite producing intellectuals by the millions and leaving few untouched by the commonly shared, cultivated, and almost hegemonic desire to focus on making life better for the poor, the "Kerala model" cannot in itself withstand the myriad ways in which an intensified capitalist logic penetrates into society and reinforces endogenous capitalist processes that were erstwhile so diligently tamed.

The Kerala model is perhaps best understood as a more radical and more consistently implemented version of general Nehruvian social democracy, flourishing at a time when Keynesian economic policy dominated in the West and developmentalism in the South. The new situation in Kerala concomitantly seems to be no more than a milder version of neoliberalism, with certain path-dependent and eccentric excesses. One eccentricity is the extent to which a majority of Kerala's population, because of how redistributive policies made land ownership and education generally available, participates in the bourgeois competition for prestige and mobility. In Kerala, even many dalits and adivasis participate in the competition for social status that centers on land and educational achievement. And, as we saw in the previous chapter, particularly for those dalits and adivasis for whom aspirations to middle-class ownership and education have come within reach, the vulnerability of their position in an increasingly consumerist and at the same time polarizing society produces anxieties more easily translated into a language of caste- or ethnically determined "culture" and "identity" rather than one of class solidarity.Being already somewhat upwardly mobile and experiencing tensions primarily in the sphere of consumption rather than production, it is more their historical background than their fragile present condition that presents itself as a source of potential humiliation or pride. Being constantly reminded, by the stress of maintaining their position as well as by the derogatory remarks of others, of this historical background they are moreover constantly reminded of those who have not experienced such mobility at all. The combination makes it likely for them to turn to a community of ethnic descent as a basis for political mobilization and to see injustice primarily in terms of discrimination. Dalit and/or adivasi identity for these persons combines the desire to pursue their own concerns for mobility, for breaking the negative grip the past keeps them in, and the wish to eliminate the inequalities of that living past altogether.

The path to identity politics that this dynamic clears and that characterizes the trajectory of many of the activist leaders of the AGMS is different from that of ordinary workers who joined

the AGMS in its land occupations or became attracted to its indigenist political vision. The latter have generally enjoyed some absolute mobility under the Kerala model but have seen their relative position vis-à-vis the middle-class more or less unchanged and therefore are not particularly stressed about living up to a higher status. Their everyday lives hold out few pretences of equality: most of them live in ghetto-like colonies or workers quarters and take orders from those willing to employ them. What the Kerala model meant for them is the ability to work and live independently of a particular landlord who can treat them as their personal slave. They have consequently become all the more dependent on selling their labor power and it is here that life has become increasingly stressful in post-reform Kerala. As government-run cooperatives collapse, migrant labor comes to compete with local workers, basic avenues for integration such as education and health care are cut, and the sector they are traditionally dependent on – agriculture – collapses, these workers see themselves increasingly excluded from Kerala society. These processes make it more likely for them to believe in a politics of autonomy than one of social integration into a society that is so obviously pushing them out.

What I have tried to describe in this chapter are the conditions that made it more likely for people to turn to indigenism. The fact that the two different class trajectories – of leaders and followers -- found each other in a joint platform and the particular articulation of their political program is however a question of the dynamics of political struggle. In the process of mobilization, the experiences of one group were shared with the other and borrowing from one to the other happened. Activists like Sunny for instance emphasized notions of dignity and self-respect also for rank-and-file workers involved in the AGMS – as he claims, "the AGMS does not accept this term "agricultural labor", they want to be owners of land, not laborers". This cultural challenge was also necessary for C K Janu to be allowed to escape the epithet "tribal leader", as if her movement were only relevant to adivasis and did not represent a more general political challenge. On the other hand, landless workers' emphasis on economic survival and practical action helped shift the attention of upwardly mobile leaders away from cultural struggle and their confrontation with upper-caste philosophy, literature, and religion and back to material issues of landlessness andaccess to development resources.

Cultural or utilitarianperspectives are not irrelevant in studying the structural conditions leading to the rise of indigenism. Yet pulling such considerations apart from the ways they express, reflect, and shape everyday life under changing relations of production and appropriation leads to sterile theorizing. Dalit and adivasi activists turn to their past not out of a primordial reflex but because they need new inspiration on how to deal with the problems of the present. To call this a "cultural revival", as is often done, is a simplification that reduces our understanding of what the movement is a reaction to. The discourse of indigenism has certain

advantages that fit the present – the demand for land, for instance, where this is the one most likely to receive government attention. People indeed act on what is best for them but how particular courses of action become interpreted as in people's best interest depends on larger social processes and people's experiences in everyday life. Proudly claiming "dalit" or "adivasi" identity and demanding land or is not purely a rational reaction to changing circumstances but more a gradual process shaped by the kinds of increasing insecurities of everyday life.

Legal structures also play a role in the rise of indigenism yet should, again, not be divorcd of class proceses. Being a "Scheduled Tribe" or not and acting according to legal opportunities and limitations is something people think about and act on in particular ways. Yet it is more interesting to look at how laws start playing a role in people's lives than it is to assume their a priori determining role. For a long time – and still to some extent – upwardly mobile "SCs" and "STs" have avoided these categories for the shame that attaches to them of not being enough "meritorious". The fact the legal categories of SC/ST plays such an important role today - though these categories have existed since independence - and are now attracting attempts to turn these categories into a source of pride rather than shame forces us to look for what has changed in the wider context. As this chapter has argued, what has changed is primarily the fact that general citizen's rights have become increasingly impotent in post-reform Kerala.

Using a theoretical understanding of the changing tendencies of global capitalism in the direction of increased polarization and dispossession helpsdiscern changes in people's everyday working lives. The experiences that people shared with me moreover allowed me to rethink these global processes and how they shape – and are shaped by – the local. Kerala's government, despite the critiques meted out at it, is still generally more committed to social equality and to resisting dramatic commodification than other Indian state governments are: those in power in Kerala know all too well that they will not easily get away with dispossessing ordinary people off their land or taking away social rights they or the generation of their parents passionately fought for. Yet changes happened in Kerala nonetheless. The remittances that are said to keep the Kerala economy afloat reinforced a status competition unfolding in the sphere of consumption, aside from a productive sector that was stagnant. A steady job in the government sector, unless at a high-ranking position, started to pale in comparison to the opportunities offered in the private sector and abroad. Those employed as workers in the agricultural sector moreover increasingly felt the pressure of being made expedient. Indigenism grew out of these changing conditions of people's lives. But it is more than simply an adaptation. It is at the same time an obvious challenge to these processes. In a program that is generally opposed to the Communist party and its emphasis on "class"-based mobilization, we nevertheless see strong

continuities with the existing Left in Kerala. It is to this that I turn in the epilogue of this dissertation.

PART 5

EPILOGUE

EPILOGUE

THE (DIS)PLACEMENTS OF CLASS

Explaining the rise of indigenism as a new form of political articulation by looking at what happened to the political programs that attracted people previously and by analyzing the locally experienced, yet globally induced, changes in people's working lives is an approach more common in studies on right wing, neo-nationalist politics. When it comes to the rise of Hindutva and its nativist "sons of the soil" rhetoric, for instance, ample attention has been paid not only to historically deconstructing its core formal concepts ("Hindu-ness", "nation"; e.g. Ludden 2005) but also to addressing the question of how class conflict becomes displaced onto cultural frames (e.g., Shani 2007; Breman 2004); to analyzing the complex and contradictory relationship of the rise of Hindutva to processes of democratization (e.g., Blom Hansen 1999; cp Jaffrelot 2003); and to looking at the kind of socio-economic changes laying the ground for Hindu nationalism to spread (e.g., Froerer 2007). When it comes to indigenous people's movements, however, such perspectives are less popular. Indigenous movements usually carry forward what are considered more positive ideals, making the "deconstruction" of their political form and their "explanation" less urgent. The hesitation to explain the rise of indigenism with the tools of critical social analysis rather than through the public claims made by these movements themselves ultimately however can isolate them from a more general critique of relations of power within the contemporary world system. The aim of this dissertation has been to study the rise of indigenism asking similar questions to those usually posed about the rise of nativism: what political dynamics existed that prevented the underlying conflicts to be articulated in the existing modern-secular repertoire of class and what more structural changes prepared the ground for this political shift. In other words, I studied what led to the displacement of class conflict and alliance from Communist to indigenist political frames. Crucial to this question has been the notion of class – not just the emic notion of class as referring to the Communist party's political focus but particularly class as a theoretical tool within the Marxist scholarly tradition that helps to link globally connected relations of power to people's everyday strategies of making a living.

I started this dissertation demonstrating the problematic historical baggage and difficult political dilemmas that a politics centered on the notion of "adivasiness" invites. It became all the more pertinent, then, to explain why dalit and adivasi workers turned away from Communism as the most obvious and hegemonic means of articulating the issues now taken up

by indigenism in Kerala. My theoretical research program and the empirical clues I found during my fieldwork complicated ideas on the rise of indigenism that tend to dominate the general literature on indigenous movements. First of all, when searching for reasons for the rise of indigenism at the level of political interactions, the prevalent idea that indigenous movements arise where there is a process of liberal "democratization" did not seem to hold ground in Kerala. Liberal democracy has been the only mode of governance in Kerala since independence. Not much evidence could be found, moreover, for the argument that it is primarily international networking that attracts indigenous people to the benefits of emphasizing their indigenous identity. International networking with indigenous movements has been very limited and often more of a political liability than a benefit for the Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha. Following activist biographies and looking into the political dynamics producing the contours of an indigenist historical narrative and political vision, I found that not democratization, nor international contacts, but encounters and interaction with the existing Left had played a major role in shaping the rise of indigenism. There were clear signs that the Communist party's increasingly alienated rhetoric of "class struggle" combined with its practical compliance with the pressures of neoliberal reform were the main trigger for the rise of indigenism in Kerala. This disillusionment with anti-systemic "workers and peasants"-centered movements after they had come to power and lost their commitment to confronting structural relations of power was not, however, a phenomenon confined to Kerala. It is a process developing throughout the late modern capitalist world system and I suggested that rather than being another step in a progressive trajectory towards ever-greater freedom for historically oppressed peoples, my findings in Kerala contributed to a different perspective: that the rise of indigenism within the current world system signals the end of a reformist cycle in world history. The end, in other words, of an "optimism of the oppressed" that earlier encouraged subalterns to believe in – and muster some patience for - the possibilities of progress within the framework of the liberal-secular nation-state.

The second level at which I subsequently studied the rise of indigenism was that of the more structural shifts that shaped the conditions under which various groups in Kerala turned to a politics of indigenism. I noted that interpreting the turn to indigenism as the strategic mobilization of cultural attachments in the face of the threat of neoliberalism – the most prevalent structural explanation given for the rise of indigenous movements in the last quarter of the twentieth century – did not fit the case of Kerala well. The strategic benefits and cultural attachments of "adivasiness" were not given, waiting in abstract to be relied upon in the face of threats to people's livelihood. Rather, my fieldwork in Kerala suggested that it was the gradual process of neoliberal restructuring itself that had determined the attractiveness of demanding

land rather than wage labor and had enticed people to start interpreting their social position and historical experiences as determined by their being "adivasi". For the recently upwardly mobile subaltern leadership of the indigenist movement in Kerala, the increasing fragility of their middle-class position was understandably interpreted as resulting not so much from the general injustice of privatization and competition within a capitalist system but as a legacy of the stigma they carried of belonging to a culturally despised social group. Amongst the adivasi agricultural workers forming the rank and file of the Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha, the turn to "indigenous" over "class" identity was on the other hand encouraged by their growing desire to claim a piece of land and envision building up a life determined by "themselves". It was a reaction that grew out of the experience of becoming increasingly expedient in the local economy in the wake of the agricultural crisis and the collapse of employment and workers protection schemes. The case of Kerala suggested that neoliberalism was not simply an external threat to subaltern communities but a process gradually shaping people's every-day lives and, in doing so, triggering different political imaginations.

These arguments on the rise of indigenism clearly emerge from the specificities of the case of Kerala. The more prevalent argument in indigenous studies is that democratization and greater tolerance for ethno-linguistic diversity on the one hand and politically strategic and culturally emancipatory strategies of dealing with the threat of accumulation by dispossession on the other triggered the rise of indigenism. This argument arises particularly from the literature on indigenous movements in Latin America, which tends to prevail in the field of indigenous studies. The same argument can garner evidence in the central tribal corridor of India. Yet this is not to argue that Kerala is, as so often, simply an "exceptional" case. Suggesting alternative explanations of the rise of indigenism in Kerala – stressing the demise of the traditional Left and the gradual disappearance of the political-economic bases of working-class identification – can also help illuminate aspects of the history of the rise of indigenism in various parts of Latin America and elsewhere where the argument of democratization and strategic resistance against neoliberalism is not entirely satisfactory. Looking at the case of the Zapatista movement in Chiapas from the perspective developed here, for instance, highlights parts of the movement's history that are often neglected in analyses focusing on how the movement forced the Mexican state to become more open to ethno-cultural diversity or on the key role played by international networks in support of indigenous resistance against globalization. A historical-political and world-systems perspective would draw attention to the fact that the demise of the PRI – the long-time hegemonic party that carried on the legacy of the Mexican revolution – was not simply a sign of "democratization" (it was always already formally democratic) but more a sign that the party had, as in Kerala, lost its commitment to the emancipatory ideals that had once

attracted the loyalty of Mexico's poor. Also, though many international activists came to Chiapas, the early phases of the Zapatista movement, as in Kerala, involved not the international indigenous movement but urban socialist-inspired intellectuals joining up with indigenous leaders (Harvey 1998). Moreover, though symbolically launched in 1994, at the beginning of the enforcement of the NAFTA free trade treaty – and hence often perceived as trying to "prevent" neoliberalism – local relations in Chiapas had already become shaped by neoliberal reform at least from 1982 onwards, when following the financial crisis the government had drastically de-prioritized land reform and started retreating its support to agrarian cooperatives functioning on communally owned so-called *edjido* land. In fact, whereas earlier accounts of the Zapatista movement often elaborated the movement's claims that it was heading a wave of democratization and resisting the government's plans for neoliberal reform, later accounts have paid more attention precisely to the shift from class to indigenous rights that the Zapatistas represented and the intertwining of neoliberal reform and new forms of political protest (e.g. Speed 2008). Even from Latin America, the argument can now be heard that the global so-called "third wave" of democratic transition was in fact a "combination of democratization and neo-liberal development policies" and that while "universaliz[ing] the language of rights" it "at the same time ... constricted the ideological and structural space for the political expression of class identities" (Young 2008: 151).

I could go further and suggest that the perspective emerging from Kerala is relevant even for Ecuador, a country that, because of its corporatist dictatorship until 1979 and the obvious threats by oil companies to indigenous land, would seem a perfect fit with the dominant frame in indigenous studies so far. Indeed, Yashar (2005) has argued strongly that indigenism in Ecuador arose due to the democratization of an erstwhile culturally-homogenizing authoritarian state in combination with the growing need to resist the threat that indigenous communities were facing of being dispossessed of their basic means of existence (Yashar 2005). We see that even here, sensitivity to an alternative perspective will however highlight historical evidence that shows parallels with Kerala. For one the fact that Ecuador's indigenous movement so explicitly grew out of Leftist organizing (Becker 2008). But also the fact that in the early years of ECUARUNARI, the major indigenous movement that arose in Ecuador, it was still dominated by a class-based *campesino* (peasant) focus that only changed to a more exclusively "ethnic" focus in 1985, after years of "emergency measures" by the presidency of Hurtado (Hey and Klak 1999: 70ff.). The latter was Left in rhetoric but neoliberal in policy and had formed the basis of structural adjustment in Ecuador. A study by Petras and Veltmeyer (2005: 139) moreover shows that indigenism came to dominate class-based mobilization as the political repression of protests increased with every subsequent popular revolt in the 1980s – an

indication that perhaps not "democratization" but in fact repression was what led to the rise of indigenism. A parallel to the rise of indigenism in Kerala that can be found in Petras and Veltmeyer's study of Ecuador is that indigenism became particularly popular after labor unions had become politically defective in the mid-80s due to soaring unemployment. All this indicates that a perspective that combines attention to systemic movement cycles and the demise of traditional "class" politics with a focus on the entanglement of indigenist forms of protest with actual neoliberal restructuring is relevant also to many places outside Kerala where "class"-based mobilization was overtaken by indigenism.

In order to draw attention to this different perspective on the rise of indigenism, it wasnecessary for meto make a clear formal distinction between Communism and indigenism – a formal distinction that could be convincing since it is one generally acknowledged in Kerala, if under different headings such as "identity politics" versus "Marxism", "Dravidian culture" versus "Communist ideology", "adivasis" versus "agricultural workers". I chose the heading of "indigenism" as a concept uniting these political references to "adivasi" belonging as it also tied these local references to the international phenomenon of indigenism. I preferred the term because it emphasizes political form over existential state of being, which is important because one of the main problems in the study of indigenous movements that I wanted to avoid was the frequent collapsing of formal political expression and substantive historical experience. The clear formal distinction between indigenism and Communism matters precisely because I was determined to historically and politically challenge the substantive distinction between indigenous people and workers and instead, from a Marxist perspective, emphasize the relational and lived unity of "cultural" and "economic" values and articulations.

Making the formal distinction between the two political currents moreover had the advantage of being able to point to certain trends not always observable within the complex ethnographic realities on the ground. As I was working on this dissertation, in June 2010, an e-mail from a Malayalee PhD student reporting on how two public intellectuals[116]had just challenged the Communist party to open the discussion on "identity politics" (*swathwa rashtriyam*) confirmed my intuition on this. The student wrote to me "It is in this background that I came to know that you have observed [in an article in the *Journal of South Asian Development*] that this particular political strategy [identity politics] is at work in this state since the 90s.", continuing that in fact it was only at the recent CPI(M) conference he attended that the reality of the emergence of "identity politics" was explicitly discussed. The emic term "identity politics" indeed had not been prevalent in public debate and the Communist party had been trying to, publicly at least, turn a

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[116] K.E.N. Kunhammed and P.K. Pocker.

blind eye to the challenge posed by indigenism. Combining ethnographic observation with formal analytical distinctions, it was nevertheless not difficult to see a social trend from "class" to "identity" before it became a prevalent emic reference to the process. Ending my analysis on this confirmatory, "predictive" note about the rise of indigenism, however, would be unsatisfactory. Social scientists after all may foresee the relations and conditions under which people make history but cannot foresee the making of history itself. Rather, they can play a key role in that and for this reason I would like to end this dissertation by warning against any closure either on the question of indigenism and Communism as contrasting currents or on the question of how the rise of indigenism relates to cycles of world history.

7.1.1 *HIDDEN HISTORIES IN THE MAKING?*

> "If we plant two plantains, and don't fertilize one of them, that one will soon die. Say that this plantain tree then decays at the basin of the other one and becomes manure; the other will certainly bare more fruit then. If the two had grown alike, both would have less fruit -- if one decays at the basin of the other, the other will have better fruit. But we say the one tree was no good, and marvel at the fruit of the other one. We never think why and how it got those great fruits. We see only one thing: the fruit on this tree is good, and the other one decayed." (C K Janu, 25 June 2005).

This allegory C K Janu once told me in reference to the unacknowledged appropriation by Hindu art forms of elements of adivasi heritage. Yet it would be equally relevant to a critique of how the Communist movement appropriated the campaigns for social justice carried on by some of the earlier anti-caste movements and grew in popularity at the same time that these movements declined. It would moreover apply to how in turn indigenist activists often claim their success is based on formulating a whole new political agenda where in fact their success depends heavily on the work done by Communist party members before them. It is precisely my awareness of the substantive continuities between Communist and indigenist initiatives that made me wonder why the shift in formal articulation had taken place. Yet in focusing on formal contrasts, I did not mean to contribute to the process by which the continuities between the two are turned into a hidden history – a history no longer recognized through contemporary lenses. From the stories told in this dissertation – and especially from the words of different activists and from their life histories – it should be clear that there is a strong continuity between what is now called the "traditional Left" and the new indigenist activism. Continuities between Communist and indigenist politics can be seen particularly clearly in what is a key issue in both movements: the issue of land. According to the AGMS, land ownership is about re-claiming ancestral territory. For many of those participating in the AGMS' land occupations it is, however, just as much about laying claim to the promises of land reform that were extended to them a

generation ago by the Communist movement but never materialized (cp Nieuwenhuys 1991). Likewise, owning a piece of land is usually represented by the AGMS as the basis from which adivasis can start to live a more autonomous life and gain greater independence. Yet for many of the people claiming land through the AGMS – and indeed for some of its leading activists[117] – owning land is at the same time a claim to what is historically and culturally of primary significance in proper Malayalee citizenship – more so even than in other Indian states[118]. Both indigenist and Communist views on land, moreover, are articulated under the shadow of a neoliberal "model of empowerment based implicitly or explicitly on property rights" (Rajagopalan 2004: 229f.; see also Humphrey and Verdery 2004). Both implicitly critique this model, either by emphasizing the emotional attachment to land so that it is not just another commodity that can be substituted by monetary compensation (Ghosh 2006) or by framing access to land as a right that the state has a duty to implement in support of the emancipation of the oppressed. It is precisely the strong dialectics and even blurring between formally indigenist and Communist visions on land that may help keep the neoliberal logic at bay in Kerala.

The strong continuity between Communism and indigenism in Kerala is certainly apparent, moreover, when viewed in comparison to indigenous movements elsewhere. Vernacular versions of international indigenist discourses – "travelling models" of indigenism – generally become interpreted in Kerala in a way that brings these discourses closer to socialist visions than to the visions circulating in indigenous networks in countries significantly less influenced by democratic socialism. The fact that in Kerala almost all indigenist leaders started their political engagement in Communist movements clearly has had its effects on the form indigenism has taken in Kerala. As Sunny, one of the few indigenist leaders who was not himself a Communist but only had parents involved in Communist movement, complained to me "even our [dalit and adivasi] leaders still have Marx in their heads!". When I subsequently pressed him on why the AGMS in Kerala has, in contrast to most dalit and adivasi movements elsewhere in India, hardly suffered from sub-caste competition and a bias towards the needs of the "creamy layer" (subaltern elites) over those of ordinary workers, even he however admitted this may well be related to what he called the "hegemony of class-thinking in Kerala".

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[117] See e.g. (Kapikadu 2008), "Beyond just a home an a name".

[118] Personal communication with anthropologists Daniel and Ursula Munster doing research on land-related (farming and environmental) issues in Kerala but with previous research experience in Tamil Nadu – according to them, the continuing symbolic value attached to land in Kerala was notable even compared to Tamil Nadu.

In other parts of the world, socialist-indigenist continuities are often less obvious. In Australia, a country where socialist movements have generally – as in the US – remained marginal, the extent to which the aboriginal struggle for rights was supported by and built on the Communist Party remains almost entirely unacknowledged (Boughton 2001)[119]. Even in Latin America, where socialist movements have historically been much stronger, continuities between socialist and indigenist organizing are not always noted. Marc Becker's work on the indigenous *levantamiento* (uprising) in June 1990 in Ecuador explicitly sets out to examine the preceding cross-fertilization between urban left-wing intelligentsia and rural indigenous activists and the fluidity in activist thinking on indigenous and class issues. In doing so, Becker's work, however, is an important and still necessary critique of the many histories that look only abstractly at the "five centuries old" indigenous struggle against colonization in Latin America and leave out the whole history of class-based organizing in the more recent past. This relates to the problem in many analyses of indigenous movements that an analytical leap is made from the here and now of indigenist mobilization to a deep history of indigenous belonging and "culture" with little interest in the concrete and more contingent social processes that have taken place in more recent decades. As Becker argues, if we actually do pay attention to this more recent and contingent history, it is striking how in Latin America indigenous organizing in the course of the twentieth century has been predominantly shaped by Leftist visions. In Kerala, this is so obvious that the alternative – that adivasi movements could have been shaped by Rightist visions (see e.g. Froerer 2007) – is hardly even contemplated. Lest we make the mistake of assuming subaltern populations are automatically more inclined towards structural social reform rather than authoritarian attempts at fixing the status quo, the fact that the AGMS is so left-inclined should probably be seen as an outcome of the actual continuity (despite all polarization) between Communist and indigenist mobilization in Kerala.

Whereas substantively the politics of Communism and indigenism are very close, even the formal distinctions sometimes break down, certainly outside of the frontline of political battle between old Left and rising indigenous movements. "Adivasi identity" is in fact a complex and contested signifier to do with being downtrodden, poor, pushed to the margins, and in need of "protection" from the state. It is only in transmission – when the need for quick "consciousness raising" arises – or in confrontation with dogmatic elements within the Communist party that adivasi identity suddenly is articulated as being about "culture" to the exclusion of "class". In Kerala, emic notions of "class" are in turn entirely open to being read as "caste". As we saw,

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[119] Bob Boughton (2001) also acknowledges the problems in this relationship – for instance in the Communist party's hesitance to acknowledge aboriginal workers as anything more culturally particular than "the lowest rung of the proletarian ladder".

early Communists were prone to translating Communism as the idea that "all human beings belong to one caste". With the Communist party slowly trying to come to terms with indigenist challenges, its speeches moreover are increasingly filled with references to "dalits" and "adivasis". When not in explicit opposition to Communism, indigenist activists likewise will stress their concern for the "poor" even more vehemently than their concern for "adivasis". It is interesting to note in this respect that from its initial focus on "the unity of all tribes" and on "recovering our adivasi culture" – phrases that arguably were borrowed from the ethnographic state – the AGMS after Muthanga has increasingly focused on "the right to live", "land for the landless" and "dignity". In the process, we may well see "culture" and "identity" taking on much more relational and dynamic meanings than their dominant interpretation was at the beginning of the indigenist wave of protest in Kerala. Though the blurring or even outright change in the meaning of notions remade in the process of political struggle will be influenced by scholarly debates, the academic consensus on the meaning of such concepts as "class", "identity", "caste" or "culture" will be all the more influenced by the political struggles outside academia. One may hence wonder what political frames will be mobilized at various critical junctures of local political histories and shifts in global balances of power. Likewise we may also ask how under the influence of an ongoing indigenist challenge, the meaning of different political keywords through which social conflicts have been addressed will change. In this respect, what I want to turn to finally is a consideration of how the substantive continuities and even formal blurring of Communist and indigenist movements in Kerala also show how even if taking place under structural pressures and limitations, the indigenist struggle is nevertheless an expression of the contingency of human action vis-à-vis the determinant course of world history.

7.1.2 *THE COHERENCE OF CRITICAL STRUGGLES*

The main reasons that presented themselves in this dissertation for the rise of indigenism in Kerala – changing global regimes of (re)production and accumulation and the demise of modern political platforms of economic integration – come close to Jonathan Friedman's view on indigenism as a dominant trend under phases of "hegemonic decline" in the world system. It is therefore well worth recapturing Friedman's argument but at the same time pointing out how despite the, almost surprising, "fit" of the rise of indigenism in Kerala with Friedman's global systems theory, my research showed the rise of indigenism is precisely *not* the historical necessity it would seem in Friedman's approach. According to Friedman (1994: 190ff.) the contemporary world system is disintegrating and fragmenting into a few nation-less cosmopolitans versus a mix of fanatic regional, ethnic and religious identities amongst other

core populations, desperate symbolic, consumptive stabs at a vanishing "modern" in the third world, and exit-strategies in the "fourth" (indigenous) world. The political process is part, according to Friedman, of the fact that US imperialism has reached the limits of its economic dominance in the world (1998: 235) and that with the decline of US hegemonic cultural space also comes the demise of the global homogenization and ranking of difference it sustained. And this, in turn, leads to intensified identity politics (ibid.). In all of this, the politics of indigeneity "is not so much about concrete indigenous groups" as about "a process of identification in the contemporary global arena that is a powerful expression of the transformation of the global system" (Friedman 1999: 408). According to Friedman, "class polarization", together with the related decline of the nation-state, is the driving mechanism behind the process of the indigenization – the desire for "rooting" -- of the majority of the world's populations and the cosmopolitanization of the world's elites. Hence "the rise of indigenous movements is part of this large systemic process" (ibid.: 198), though Friedman adds that "this is not to say that it is a mere product in a mechanical deterministic sense".

Yet, though not "mechanically" or "deterministically" produced, the historical inevitability - and hence, most would think, pessimism - of Friedman's view is palpable. It has sometimes led to the idea that Friedman is particularly critical of indigenous movements – a mistaken reading since Friedman in fact stresses that though indigenization is indeed one process, it takes on very different forms: "in certain conditions it produces alternative identities against the state, in other conditions it can produce extreme nationalism within the state" (Friedman 1999: 401). In this sense, Friedman does not differ fundamentally from the proponents of indigenous movements who argue against criticism of the potential exclusivist political tendencies hiding under the notion of indigeneity by arguing for the crucial difference between subaltern and majoritarian indigenist movements (e.g. Kenrick and Lewis 2003 against Kuper 2003). Friedman moreover goes further than most advocates of indigenous movements by defending them also via another route: by ridiculing the fears of cosmopolitan liberal elites – "the global cocktail circuit" (1999" 406) - of the indigenizing tendencies of the majority of the world. Friedman debunks what he considers elite attempts to deconstruct notions of territorial belonging or cultural coherence as efforts to shape the world according to these elites' own worldview from "above it all". Such deconstructivist efforts, according to Friedman, tend to rely on moral judgments against the "practice of a particular kind of identity, an identity of rootedness, of genealogy as it relates to territory" and to the fact that such identities are logically (though not necessarily empirically) prior to the nation-state (1999: 398). The deconstructivist perspective that Friedman criticizes relies, according to him, on entirely abstracted analytical notions of culture as attached to objects – the notion that an indigenous

person talking into an i-phone is proof of "hybridity" – rather than on a notion of culture as a structure of coherence shaped by the way people live their lives (ibid.).

What we see, hence, is that Friedman in fact comes down squarely in defense of indigenous movements and culturally coherent indigenous identities. Lack of support for indigenous movements is not the problem with Friedman's global systemic perspective – nor, I believe, with the argument I worked out in this dissertation. What is problematic about Friedman's vision, however, is that despite defending indigenous movements, we are still – *pace* caveats against mechanical analyses and determinism – left with the notion that these movements signal a path *back* to a survivalist reliance on more local, territorially rooted ways of life, a *regression* from the moment of modern democracy and class reformism (see also Rata 2003). For Friedman, culture and capital are the key drivers of history: culture as the historically produced structures of people's lives, and capital as endlessly accumulated wealth that determines the global tendency towards global integration or fragmentation. It is here that I have preferred to follow the route taken by Philip McMichael. Though working in the same world-systems school of thought as Friedman, McMichael provides a more promising route of rescuing indigenous movements from necessarily being the harbingers of a new Dark Ages: by placing "critical struggles – rather than culture or capital – at the center of analysis. Critical, in world-systems terms, entails epistemologically challenging taken for granted views of the world: the need to "unthink" the status quo - an endeavor in which social movements and academia are crucial partners (Wallerstein 2004). Struggle, on the other hand, for those who like Wallerstein and McMichael acknowledge the emergence of a capitalist world economy, is not about culture versus capital but labor versus capital. The difference a capitalist world economy makes is that it is driven not just by the concentration of abstract wealth in particular places since the time when the means for such accumulation (n.b. money) were invented – the kind of "capital" Friedman's historical view focuses on - but by class struggle through the state which in the late seventeenth century for the first time became captured by capital and henceforth has been trying to introduce the social conditions under which capital would become a continuous space-making force.

Combining attention to the epistemological challenges posed by "indigenous" movements like the AGMS with attention to their role in an ongoing global class struggle between labor and capital posits these movements not as simply obeying set, circularly repeating rules of history but as fundamentally engaged in the contradictions of the contemporary world system. From a critical struggles perspective, "indigenous" movements should not automatically be taken to be what they present themselves as within the existing and still hegemonic discourse of liberal democracy. What demand our attention instead are the instances where "adivasiness" in

struggle takes on meanings hardly recognizable in the concepts ruling our present thought – instances where the movement escapes the kind of polarizing political dynamic between "class" and "culture" that the status quo forces it into. While being part of a capitalist world economy and inevitably affected by its logic, the AGMS does not simply reproduce this logic but in fact creates a solidarity that potentially defies it. If Kerala is a place that complicates the interpretation of indigenism as the next step in a global forward march of liberal emancipation, it is at the same time a place where we see how the struggle of labor has an enduring influence on the process of endless capital accumulation. Notwithstanding the "progress" of world capitalism and its manifestations in Kerala, in the AGMS' combined priority to the needs of the most oppressed with a tendency to leave the category of the "adivasi" much more open than any movements (or intellectuals) before it have, we can see glimpses of the extent to which the collective rationality to overcome capitalism has also progressed: the struggle continues.

PART 6

END MATTER

GLOSSARY

Adiya	Name of a Scheduled Tribe in Kerala, mostly landless ex-slave agricultural laborers (lit. "slave").
Adivasi	Lit. "aboriginal". In common language often used interchangeably with "Scheduled Tribe".
AITUC	All Indian Trade Union Congress, affiliated to CPI.
AKS	Adivasi Kshema Samithi, CPI(M)'s adivasi wing in Kerala founded in 2001.
AGMS	Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha, name adopted in 2001 by the most prominent new adivasi movement in Kerala (lit. "Indigenous Clans Grand Council")
Ambedkar	Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (14 April 1891 — 6 December 1956), also known as Babasaheb, most prominent dalit leader of India, and chief architect of the Indian Constitution.
Ayyankali	Early dalit (Pulaya) leader of Kerala. Became MLA in 1910. Lived from 1863–1941.
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party. Hindutva/Hindu nationalist party, part of umbrella group, the Sangh Parivar that includes the paramilitary anti-Muslim RSS and the international VHP organization, active in fund-raising among the Indian diaspora.
Cochin	City but also name of former Princely State in Southern Kerala
CITU	Centre of Indian Trade Unions, affiliated to CPI(M).
C K Janu	Adiya woman leading the AGMS.
Communalism	Generally refers to attempts to create antagonism between "communities", usually meaning Hindu versus Muslim communities.
Congress	Indian National Congress or INC
CPI	Communist Party of India. Name of the original party formed at Kerala level in 1939 out of the "Congress Socialist Party" and name, after the 1964 split, of the party in favor of cooperation with Congress. At a national level, according to the (now) CPI the original party was formed in 1925, according to the CPI(M) the original CPI was formed in 1920.
CPI(M)	Communist Party of India (Marxist) – name of party split off from the CPI in 1964 under leadership of EMS Namboodiripad. (Periods in government after 1964: March 1967-Oct 1969; Jan 1980-Oct 1981; March 1987-June 1991; May 1996-May 2001; May 2006-present)
CPI(ML)	Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist). Party founded by Kanu Sanyal on April 22, 1969 in Calcutta in wake of the Naxalbari uprising.
Dalit	Lit. "crushed", referring generally to those oppressed by the caste system. Often used interchangeably with "Scheduled Caste".
EMS	Initials by which Kerala's first Chief Minister EMS Namboodiripad (1909-1998) is known. Chief Minister from April 1957-July 1959 and again from March 1967-October 1969. General Secretary of the CPI(M) from 1977 until 1992.
Ezhava	Known in Malabar as Tiyya. Listed as OBC. A community/caste treated as untouchables in nineteenth century Kerala (religiously considered "Shudras") that experienced great vertical mobility in the twentieth century.
gherao	Encirclement – political protest tactic whereby activists encircle a government functionary or "capitalist" (mudalali), prevent him (or her) from leaving, and shout slogans.

goonda	Thug
INTUC	Indian National Trade Union Congress, trade union affiliated to Congress.
jati	Commonly translated as "community" or "caste" – used in reference to all different social and religious sub-groups in India. Jati names usually refer to a particular traditional occupation. Different from varna which means "caste" (or lit. color) in religious Hindu four-fold scheme of priests/Brahmins, warriors/Kshatriyas, merchants/Vaishyas, and artisans/Shudras (and out-castes/untouchables).
jenmi	Landlord of Nayar or Namboodiri caste.
Kattunayakan	Scheduled Tribe, generally landless, background of making a living by collecting forest products.
KIRTADS	Kerala Institute for Research, Training and Development Studies of Scheduled castes and Schedules Tribes. Governmental organization set up in 1979 under the Ministry of SC/ST Development.
Kunduvadian	Formerly Scheduled Tribe, now "Other Eligible Community".
Kurichiya	Scheduled Tribe, mostly small farmers.
Kuruma	Scheduled Tribe, mostly small farmers.
KSKTU	The Kerala State Karshaka Thozhilali Union, i.e. Agricultural Workers' Union, affiliated to the CPI(M).
LDF	Left Democratic Front, coalition lead by CPI(M) in Kerala.
Malabar	Northern part of what is now Kerala – during the colonial period under direct British rule from Madras (Chennai).
Malayalam	Dravidian language formally spoken in territory of what with the States Reorganisation Act of 1956 became Kerala. The language has many regional dialects as well as (caste-specific) sociolects.
Malayalee	Person originating from Kerala (speaking Malayalam) – popularly known also as "Mallu".
MLA	Member of Legislative Assembly
moopan	Generally considered the name for a "tribal chieftain".
Muthanga	Name of Wildlife Sanctuary established in 1973 under the Forest Department in Wayanad. Site of most prominent land occupation organized by the AGMS in 2003.
Nayar	Name of a prominent so-called a "forward caste" in Kerala (according to Hindu religious interpretation considered warriors/"Kshatriyas").
Namboodiri	"Highest" Brahmin caste in Kerala.
Naxal/Naxalite	Generic term used for anti-parliamentary, militant Communist groups in India, mostly tracing their origin back to the CPI(ML) though other groupings include the Maoist Communist Centre and the People's War Group.
Nehru	Jawaharlal Nehru (14 November 1889–27 May 1964. First prime minister of India from 1947 to 1964.
OBC	Other Backward Class. Communities formally considered better-of than SCs and STs yet still "historically disadvantaged".
Paniya	Name of a Scheduled Tribe in Kerala, mostly landless ex-slave agricultural laborers (lit. "worker").
panchayat	In common parlance refers to the village or municipal government. With the "Kerala Panchayat Raj Act & Municipality Act" of 1994, administratively divided in rural areas into four levels: grama sabha (ward level- "direct democracy"), grama panchayat (at village level), block panchayat (at the "taluka" level) and

	district panchayat (at district level). In urban areas there is only the Municipality or Municipal Corporation.
Pillai	Nayar sub-caste in Kerala (and last name).
Pulaya	Name of a Scheduled Caste in Kerala consisting mostly of agricultural laborers.
RMS	Rashtriya Maha Sabha. Name of political party attached to AGMS, launched on February 19, 2004.
Savarna	The so-called "twice-born" upper-castes, the first three varnas in the Hindu religious caste hierarchy: Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas.
SC	Scheduled Caste, i.e. a community listed as a "caste" eligible for affirmative action – in daily language used as synonym for "dalit" (or harijan).
Secretariat	Name given in Kerala to government complex housing the highest echelon of the state's administrative structure.
SNDP	Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana yogam, organization by Sree Narayana Guru, an Ezhava spiritual reformer. The organization was founded in 1903 and is still active today.
SSLC	Secondary School Leaving Certificate.
ST	Scheduled Tribe, i.e. a community listed as a "tribe" eligible for affirmative action – in daily language used as synonym for "adivasi" (or girijan).
Syrian Christians	"Forward" community of Christians (considering themselves of upper-caste origin) said to have been converted in early days of Christianity by St. Thomas. As opposed to later, often lower-caste, Christian converts.
Travancore	Former Princely State in what is now southern Kerala.
UDF	United Democratic Front, coalition under leadership of Congress in Kerala.
Wayanad	Northern (former Malabar), hilly district of Kerala with highest concentration of STs (17 percent; roughly a third of all STs in Kerala according to 2006 KIRTADS data).

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