

GENERAL ARTICLES

Crisis and retirement Alienation in Kerala's tea belt

Jayaseelan Raj

Abstract: The recent crisis in the tea industry has devastated the livelihood of the Dalit workforce in the South Indian state of Kerala. Retired workers were worst affected, since the plantation companies—under the guise of the crisis—deferred their service payout. This article seeks to understand the severe alienation of the retirees as they struggle to regain lost respect, kinship network, and everyday sociality in the plantations and beyond. I argue that the alienation produced through their dispossession as wage laborers and the discrimination as Tamil-speaking Dalit must be understood as an interrelated process, whereas the source of alienation cannot be reduced to production or categorical relations alone.

Keywords: India, Kerala, plantation, retiree, Tamil, tea

The recent economic crisis in the Indian tea industry has shattered the life of the plantation workers in the tea belt of Peermade, Kerala. They are the descendants of the Tamil “outcaste” indentured laborers who were brought to work in the colonial tea plantations from the 1860s. The crisis has had an enormous impact on the workers, as the Indian tea industry employs 1.26 million people on tea plantations and 2 million people indirectly. In the Peermade tea belt, workers have faced utter poverty and famine, a shattered social life, and the withdrawal of welfare measures previously enjoyed. While many families remained on the plantations, others who had lived there for more than five generations were compelled to seek work elsewhere. Some went with their families to either their ancestral villages or industrial townships in Tamil

Nadu. The crisis thus punctured the isolated environments of the plantations and precipitated neoliberal reforms that closed down production in many areas either partially or completely. The crisis shattered the dreams of the retirees who, after 40 years of work, were entitled to an end of employment payout/gratuity (*service kāsu*).¹ Such was not forthcoming with the crisis, and payment was deferred for those who retired in or after 2000. The deferral of retirement benefits was a blow to many aspirations of the workers such as buying a house plot, arranging marriage for the children, or treating an illness for which treatment had been delayed. For the retirees, the payout was the only means to retain respect, sustain kinship relations, and engage with everyday sociality in the plantations. The payout was vital to fight the alienation resulting from



being a Dalit-Tamil-underclass retiree in the plantations.

Based on one-year ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the Valley estate² of the Peermade tea belt in 2011, this article documents the retirees' lived experience of being denied gratuity. I argue that the retirees' loosening of control over their life situation in the crisis context can be best understood as a phenomenon of total alienation where they lose control not only over daily subsistence but also over kinship networks, everyday sociality, and their own sense of self as they consider themselves worthless without gratuity. By alienation, I refer to a thorough lack of control that people may come to have over their socioeconomic situation and by extension even over the very barest circumstances of existence itself. Alienation, in this regard, is a social process (Twining 1980), located at the intersection between "social-structural conditions and psychological orientation" (Kohn 1976: 111). For the retirees, alienation becomes the primary mode of experiencing life in the context of deferred gratuity. Terms such as exploitation and marginality only impart a weaker sense when it comes to understanding the lived experience of the workers. Alienation encompasses the processes of exploitation and dispossession but also engages with the subjective experience of the exploited and dispossessed. Such an orientation is a further extension of a Marxian alienation that is "both an objective fact of individual's life which also has a subjective dimension" (Khan 1995: 222).

Marx ([1844] 1959) fundamentally located alienation in the separation of product from the producer that emerges as a result of private property, commodity fetishism, and the objectification of labor (Marx and Engels [1846] 1964; see also Israel 1971; Lukacs [1923] 1971; Mészáros 1970; Ollman 1971). The Marxian approach to alienation, as a separation of the producer from the product, has been a dominant orientation in anthropological research as well. Michael Taussig (1980), for instance, discusses the alienation of peasants when they become wage laborers in the sugar plantations in Co-

lombia and in the mines of Bolivia, separated from their product in the process of capitalist development.³ James Carrier (1992) likewise analyzes a diachronic process and degrees of alienation in Britain and the United States by examining historical shifts in various modes of production affecting producers' control over their products. Steven Sangren (1991, 2000) employs a Marxian framework in understanding the social reproduction of alienation in Chinese society. For Sangren, Chinese worshippers produce the power and divinity of deities (territorial cult gods) as part of the production of cultural symbols, which in turn becomes central to the (re)production of society at large. However, the worshippers attribute their own existence to the power of deities, thus alienating themselves from their product—the power and divinity of deities. Sangren thus defines alienation as the inversion of subject and object in the (re)production of society.

While an understanding of alienation as a separation of producer from the product is significant, the lived experience of alienation, even in industrial settings, cannot be reduced to alienation from specific relations of production. Alienation, as total loosening of control over workers' life situation, is inextricably linked to not only their economic marginality but also their social marginality. Alienation produced by the stigma attached to forms of the workers' identity and by their suspension from wider social relations plays a central role in loosening of control over their life situation. In the retirees' case, the deceptive capitalist relations that denied them even the meager retirement benefits further reinforce their stigmatized identities and their suspension from sociality and kinship relations. To get a total sense of human alienation, then, the alienation resulting from specific relations of productive exploitation should be extended into wider networks of relational obligation, especially in a context as caste ridden as India. This *total* alienation of the retirees calls for a holistic understanding of alienation in the ethnographies of the marginalized.

Deferred payouts: The agony of grief

The retirees express a particular understanding of the crisis-ridden plantation from the position of those who have experienced plantation work over the long term, having seen the establishment of the plantation economy through various stages and built expectations accordingly. Many of the retirees I encountered had more than 40 years of plantation work, and the crisis had particular poignancy for them. The misfortune is that the workers who retired over the last decade also heavily suffered in what were the early years of postcolonial state formation when labor laws were rudimentary and infrastructural facilities were highly limited for workers. For instance, the company allocated them half of each tenement (*pathividu*), not a full tenement (*muzhuvidu*), as is the case now. Temporary workers only received the veranda of any full tenement. The payout was the only hope sustaining many of them throughout the hardness of plantation life. The deferral of what had become a dream payment has caused disappointment and bitterness.

These workers have over time created their own social and cultural world in the plantations, which provided them a sense of control and order in their life, despite scarcity and hardship. The creation of a unified and partly isolated plantation community encouraged the workers over time to cease considering themselves displaced from Tamil Nadu as a consequence of the indenture system. Returning to their native villages would mean reengaging into caste discriminations from which their ancestors had attempted to escape (Raj 2014). Despite the crisis, most workers did not want to confront the prospect of returning to their villages. They very much want to remain on the plantation, since it has become their home where they have developed a sense of kinship, where many of their children have been born, educated, and worked, and where many of their parents had died and been buried. But, for many, the ability to stay depended on the continuation of the plantation system and on receiving the deferred payouts.

The economic crisis and the subsequent lockout of the plantations dashed their hopes of clinging on to plantation life and its community.

In order to hold on to the plantation, they needed to have their own place to live after their retirement. The retirees followed many strategies to secure a place within the plantation belt. Some attempted to buy small plots of surrounding land, but a major strategy was to secure a permanent position for their children in the plantation so that the existing tenement they had occupied in the plantation could be retained. Many had built small outbuildings to the tenement or had planted fruit trees, thus attaching themselves to the buildings where major social occasions had occurred. In a few cases, the strategy was to try to win acceptance to continue living in their children's tenement house, promising to contribute from their pension. The stigma associated with parents living in their daughters' households constrained the retirees' options for accommodation. In accordance with customary understandings, staying with the daughter's family means the parents also rely on the daughter's family even if their daughter is working and contributing toward the income of the family into which she has married. However, the ability to stay with their son-in-law's family is more acceptable if they are not totally dependent and are able to independently contribute to the household income. For instance, the parents could stay with their daughter if they have any inheritable property, which includes the gratuity amount and the provident fund. In a few other cases, circumstances that allowed the parents to stay with their daughter's family include an agreement between the daughter and her husband regarding her parents' needs and her dominance in making decisions in her family affairs.

By disrupting this moral economy of exchange within domestic relationships, the crisis further alienated many retirees from the communities they had effectively created. This is expressed in feeling a lack of respect and recognition as a function of the deferment of their retirement benefits and their ability to redeploy

those benefits as gifts and obligations among relatives. A major reason for this loss of respect and recognition is that the retirees were no longer treated as active members of the workers' society. I have seen workers arrange marriages for their children when they were still permanent workers because fewer people would want to attend functions in the retirees' homes. This concern was very evident whenever workers discussed and gossiped about such occasions. These issues also come to the fore when workers engage in quarrels and make comments related to the retirement of other workers. For instance, people often say, "You can't dance for so long," which means the other person can't hang around the plantation for much longer.

As Penny Vera-Sanso's (2007) study shows, the socioeconomic policies formulated to improve the life situation of "weaker sections of society" often fail to recognize the needs of the ageing population. Their neglect by the state means that, for the elderly, the maintenance of respect and status in plantation society depends on retirement benefits. It enables them to suspend the cultural forces that produce the lowly status of retirees. The payout for the retirees was often crucial in sustaining the social and economic obligations of the elderly to kin. Children's reliance on transfers from their parents and grandparents is widely noted in South Asian studies (e.g., Vera-Sanso 2006, 2007). But the loss of autonomy of elderly individuals and of the individualized ethos that had become part of modern plantation life also upset them. Many did not want to be a burden or indebted to their children and saw a moral dignity in economic independence.

In the Valley estate, the retirees from 2000 to 2011 numbered 121. Of them, 47 had passed away by the time I started fieldwork in 2011. The relatives of most of the deceased told me their last wish had been to receive gratuity before they died. This theme of "longing for gratuity" dominated the funerals of deceased retirees. I attended three such funerals during fieldwork. Of those who were alive, 34 had moved back to their native villages and to industrial centers in

Tamil Nadu to secure their livelihood. Those who continued living on the plantation (40 retirees) largely relied on the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme [MGNREGS). These retirees were distressed by the ongoing deferral of gratuity payments. This contributed to existing hardships such as poverty and poor health. Many of the older generation characterized their situation as "still waiting to be buried" (*mannukulle pokāma kidakken*). Most retirees I talked to often came in various ways back to the topic of "death." Although initially I underestimated it as a usual conversation of older people whose health had been ruined from 40 years of plantation work, I quickly realized the intensity of their talk about the futility of life and death was closely related to the crisis and the deferred payments. There was a strong sense that life had cheated them and that their life was now a tragic story. Certain aesthetics of pain and suffering were used to formulate their biographies and highlight their sorrow.

While the workers in general had lost hope of receiving gratuity, a few opted for small-scale trade, where they would buy tea in bulk from the company and sell it outside the tea belt, specifically in hotels. The company encouraged this option, since the price of the tea for the retirees was closer to the market rate (80 rupees per kilo), when the market rate was just 5 rupees higher than the factory price. Those who have not chosen this strategy told me there is no point in getting gratuity in bits and pieces in the form of tea, for they always considered it their life savings. This lump sum amount holds out the promise of purchasing a house or a plot of land. Furthermore, the purchase of tea is tricky, since they did not have the social network, cultural capital, or functional ability to sell the tea. Those who opted to buy tea in bulk often complained about the futility of this arrangement, as they have to give it to others at a discount to resell on their behalf, and this brings its own complications.

Adding to the distress is the fact that many plantation workers were not involved in pension schemes. Pension schemes for retirees from the

provident fund require workers to initially deposit 30,000 rupees to be eligible for the monthly pension, which varies from 700 to 1,000 rupees depending on years of service. The pension scheme was implemented only in 1972. Most Valley estate retirees do not have pension, since they did not have the money to pay the initial amount. While paying the initial amount and getting into the pension scheme is indeed economically beneficial, even workers who could manage to pay the initial amount were not going for it out of suspicion over the scheme. Sevvaatha, one of my informants, told me these things are “not practical,” and we need to have educated children to get good advice (*padicha pullanga vēnum*). The lack of pension makes the retirees much more vulnerable, since the pension scheme, despite the amount being so little, is the only scheme that provides financial security to the retirees.

The crisis affected the workers unequally, and this accentuated the stigma felt by those who did not have sources of support other than their gratuity. This would include especially those who did not have sons who could meet the expenses of their retired parents. For example, many of those employed in the MGNREG scheme were considered the most affected, and were sometimes despised by others, because of the popular assumption in the plantation that only those who did not have any other options for livelihood would seek work under the scheme. The shame of state support implied a lack of autonomy and kinship. The workers had the opportunity to file a case against the payout deferral. Yesuraj, a retired worker, received a favorable verdict. The court also ruled that the company pay 10 percent annual interest for the period the gratuity was deferred. While this 10 percent is applicable to all the workers, each retiree must file a separate case to receive this verdict and these payments. Workers found it difficult to meet the court trial expenses and mostly refrained from this option. Furthermore, there were always rumors the company was going to sell a few of their estates to pay the gratuity, which would make the workers wait for

a few months before thinking about any action. Invariably, the gossips and rumors worked to make the workers wait, and many continue to wait.

What follows is the ethnographic discussion of the retirees as they attempt to resist alienation in the context of deferred payout. I have provided three ethnographic case studies of retiree families: the first examines the experience of caste discrimination in the village of social origin, and the other two show the alienated situation of the retirees and their attempt to overcome that alienation through devising different strategies.

Between the devil and the deep blue sea: Saraswathi's tragedy

The situation of Saraswathi, a retired worker in her early sixties, illustrates the alienation of retirees, for she had to face the worst experiences of untouchability for being a Dalit woman. The intense practice of caste in Tamil villages discriminated against the Dalits. Caste processes have changed historically over time, but in many places, those changes have not brought any significant weakening of caste discriminations. Caste worked out its way into different modern situations. Saraswathi's situation reveals that moving to their villages of social origin was not a viable option for the retirees.

In 2005, a year before her official retirement, Saraswathi took voluntary retirement and left with her son, Selvam, for her native village of Kallupatti in southern Tamil Nadu. Saraswathi's life went from the existing hardships of plantation society to an unfolding tragedy that approaches the dark themes of 1970s Tamil movies such as *Aval Oru Thodarkathai* (She is a never-ending story), which depicts the poverty and agony caused by unexpected tragedies in working-class families.⁴ Saraswathi's husband, Kalimuthu, passed away in 1998 as a result of binge drinking. Devi, Saraswathi's daughter (her elder child), had passed away a year after Devi's husband, Manikkam, was killed in an accident

while loading wood in a truck. Saraswathi accused Devi's in-laws of sorcery (*sei-vinai*) that she believed had killed her daughter. While these tragic events happened in 2006 and 2007, respectively, Devi's son had committed suicide in 2009, allegedly due to ill treatment by Devi's in-laws with whom he was staying in Kudalur village in Theni District of southern Tamil Nadu. In addition to this pain and agony, what made Saraswathi, in her own words, "close to a dead person" (*jadamā vāzhuren*) was Selvam's excessive drinking after his wife had two abortions, and possibly because he was distressed by the early demise of his only sister, her husband, and their son. He also believed (similar to many workers who lamented the tragedy of the family) the sorcery by Devi's in-laws had ruined the family.

In 2006, Saraswathi, along with Selvam and his wife, left Kallupatti for Kudalur to stay with Devi after Manikkam died. Saraswathi and Selvam's presence and support were important for Devi, since her in-laws blamed her bad omen/luck for their son's death, and they often fought with her. In Kudalur, Saraswathi rented a hut for 500 rupees per month. Saraswathi and Devi undertook extremely low-wage manual labor in nearby agricultural land (*kāttu vēlai*), while Selvam commuted to different locations for work in the construction industry as a helper (*kaiyāl*) for a mason (*maisthrie*). Selvam's wife suffered from various health issues and didn't go to work. This routine life was seriously hit by Devi's sudden death around eight months after Saraswathi went to Kudalur to support Devi. After Devi's death, they returned to Kallupatti. There, they lived in relatives' small mud house and undertook similar work they had done in Kudalur—Saraswathi for *kāttu vēlai* in agricultural land (particularly weeding) and Selvam as *kaiyāl* in the construction industry.

However, the distress in their personal lives was fueled by caste discrimination in Kallupatti. In the village, the "untouchable" Dalits did not have the right to sit inside the teashop or to drink tea in a glass cup (*kuppi*). The Dalits must stand outside the teashop and drink from either

a coconut shell or a steel cup depending on the availability. Since Saraswathi and family were not used to these explicit everyday forms of untouchability rooted in the ritual aspects of the caste system, the caste humiliation they experienced in Kallupatti was intense and higher than for those Dalits who were originally born and reared in the village. This is because, as mentioned earlier, they were relatively shielded from explicit caste discrimination in the plantation. This means Saraswathi had grown up enjoying the relatively egalitarian social relations made possible on plantations, where the higher castes had little power compared to their counterparts in Tamil Nadu. Accordingly, the economic crisis and the consequent deferral of retirement benefits forced plantation Tamil Dalits to migrate back into the caste atrocities from which they had originally attempted to escape when they had first migrated to the plantations.

Saraswathi asked me not to tell other workers about the discrimination and forms of untouchability her family experienced in her native village. Although many workers would be sympathetic to her miseries, a few could taunt her for leaving and for her lack of foresight. As I have discussed elsewhere (Raj 2014), the workers differentiate themselves economically and socially, and she feared someone using her situation to assert their own superior capacities to control life's chances and cope with the crisis. Saraswathi told me she had not cheated or hurt anyone (*yarukkum oru dhrōhamum seyyalai*) to warrant being so badly by the goddess Mariaman. She considers herself, in this regard, morally high, as testified by many in the plantations. She used to help many people. For instance, she told me (and many of her former neighbors confirmed) that whenever women from the neighboring tenements needed rice, kerosene, sugar, or any other necessary commodities, she was never hesitant to give out, and she was never concerned over whether they would return it. In her own words, she never told them "no" (*il-lannu sollamāttēn*).

I talked to Saraswathi whenever she came to the plantation to check if the retirees would be

getting their gratuity soon. One day, she was so upset after the estate manager told her that a significant amount from her gratuity would be deducted toward the electricity bill since she had failed to cancel her tenement's electricity connection when she moved out. She was unaware the connection had to be canceled or that she would be charged even if she was not using the electricity. The workers' tenements in Valley estate were electrified only in 2001, and the older generations of workers, such as Saraswathi, are still unaware of the bureaucratic requirements involved in electricity connections. This made her so sad that she put her alienated situation into thoughtful words, beginning with a proverb: "My life is like a beggar's life (*Pichakaran pozhappu*), this land [the plantation] will not let us live or die. If I get the gratuity, I would ask my son to move out of the village and close my eyes [would not mind to die then]." While these analogies to a beggar's life paint a grim picture of plantation life, they are not exaggerations, particularly given the centrality of the retirement amount for their livelihood. The ingenuity or creativity of many Dalit (plantation) women lies in presenting their life situation in poetic terms where they often draw analogies from myth but also from contemporary Tamil films (Daniel 1996; Ram 2007). Indeed, many popular films often relocalize or reembody the narratives of myth, and both myth and film in turn become allegories that are relocalized and reembodyed in the personal poetic narratives of Tamil women who are sensitive to the poetics of tragedy.

While Saraswathi indeed believed in the power of sorcery and blamed her daughter's in-laws for her death, many also saw it as a strategy to cope with the shame of her and her family's inability to save her daughter and grandson. The aesthetics of tragedy here is an one of alienation, of loneliness—an alienation from the social world but also from the protective care of the gods, and what's more of Mariamman. It is the poetic paradox of this situation that draws out Saraswathi's deep sense of injustice. In short, Saraswathi was trapped between the devil and

the deep blue sea. She was unable to return to the plantation since she had trouble in finding an alternative place to live or in retaining the house/tenement in the Valley estate. However, staying in her village of origin would mean she and her family would be exposed to the vicious caste practices from which her ancestors escaped. While Saraswathi's situation exposes the tragedy of alienation of those who attempt to escape plantation life, the next case of a retired couple elucidates the retirees' struggle to cling to the plantation society and their attempt to resist being alienated further and exposed to the caste atrocities in their village of origin.

Failed attempts to stay on: Shanmugham and Saroja

The dilemma of finding a place to live within the plantations to resist further alienation is evident in the ethnographic case of Shanmugham and Saroja. Shanmugham was born in the Valley estate in early 1940s but went to his native village of Irukkanthurai in southern Tamil Nadu when he was 10 years old. In Irukkanthurai, he had to work as a bonded labor (*Pannaiyal*) for a landlord (*Pannaiyar*) for 5 rupees per month to repay the amount his father had borrowed from the landlord to arrange his elder sister's marriage. He told me the landlord's henchmen forcefully took him from his hiding place, which he recalled was full of giant milkweeds. His father was forced to assent to Shanmugham's bonded labor since there was no other way to pay off the debt. Shanmugham was in bonded labor—or, in his own words, "took the hoe (*manvetti*) in his hand"—by the age of 12. He escaped to the plantation after two years of bonded servitude. He joined two of his elder brothers who were already working in the Valley estate. He secured permanent work in the plantation and later at 18 was married. Tragically, Shanmugham's first wife passed away after nine years of marriage, leaving Shanmugham with their two small children (a boy and girl). Shanmugham married again in 1966 to Saroja, who was then living

with her parents in a neighboring tea estate. The couple had two daughters: Selvi and Mary.

One of Shanmugham's elder brothers took care of the first two children, as Shanmugham moved to a separate house after his second marriage. In 1995, Shanmugham arranged Selvi's marriage by closing an LIC⁵ savings account. He later arranged Mary's marriage with the gratuity he received after retiring in 1996. Shanmugham and Saroja, however, were able to retain their house in the plantation, since Saroja was still a permanent laborer. Shanmugham told me he was able to lead a decent life even after his retirement; he was able to have his *kanji* (literally, rice gruel but colloquially, food in general) without much difficulty. However, the couple's life situation drastically changed when the tea company shut down part of its operation (the factory was closed down, but plucking continued), in response to the crisis, resulting in reduced workdays and deferred wages. Saroja retired in 2002 and was not given her gratuity. As a result, both she and Shanmugham had to seek work outside the plantation, and they registered under the MGNREGS. Whenever they didn't get work under the scheme, Saroja looked for work as a tea plucker or pepper picker in smaller plantations outside the estate (*puthuveli*); Shanmugham found some work in the cardamom fields or else the cultivation of vegetables also in *puthuveli*.

While Shanmugham insisted that he managed to find money to buy rice, he nonetheless said he worried ceaselessly, especially about having "a roof over their heads." He often complained he didn't have even a hut to rest his head at night (*thalai saikka kudisaiillai*) and his eyes often filled with tears, as he didn't have enough money even for renting a place. Saroja often intervened with self-critique: "We have rented our brains" (*Puthiye kadam koduthutten*). By this, Saroja meant they should have planned better for their future and bought a small piece of land or a house for security after retirement. In other words, they did not use their brains. Saroja's expression is common in India, where there has been a dramatic rise in the cost of living—especially of land and gold—as a result of neoliberal

policies. The hike in land price has added to the crisis for the plantation workers, as plots around the plantations are virtually unaffordable. Things are exacerbated for Shanmugham and Saroja for other cultural reasons connected to the question of respect. The couple felt they could not stay with their daughters because of the social humiliation involved. Shanmugham could not approach his son for support, or exert the obligation due to a father, because his brother took over the role of rearing his son. His son does not regard him as his proper father. However, Shanmugham's son-in-law had helped him rent a house as long as Shanmugham shares a significant amount of his wife's pension payout with his elder daughter.

In mid-November 2011, I was sitting near the crèche-turned-church when Shanmugham came rushing in the direction of the closed factory. When I asked why he was rushing, Shanmugham smiled and said he would tell me upon his return. I waited for half an hour when he eventually returned with a grim face. He'd gone to meet the estate manager, who had stopped at the factory for a routine equipment check. Shanmugham had tried to negotiate a special deal: he would not make an immediate claim on Saroja's pension payout if the manager would let them rent a plantation tenement for a few years. The manager had refused his request, saying it would be illegal and he had no authority to do so. Shanmugham told me to keep quiet about his secret meeting with the manager, although he didn't really care if I told others in the estate because he knew many workers making similar attempts. Conversations with other retirees confirmed that many were trying to keep their accommodation on the plantation. This incident also underlines the increased alienation Shanmugham had experienced as the result of the crisis. Shanmugham and Saroja's alienated situation shows that the deferred payout had created great uncertainty, which had serious implications for their sociality and kinship relations. The retirees' plight gives a potent sense of the alienation they are experiencing that ramifies throughout the community they head.

The payout gave them a chance to fully establish themselves in a new horizon of possibility—to buy land and to overcome an alienated condition of dependency. These hopes have been dashed. The deferment forces the plantation workers at the end of their days back into a world of alienation they had hoped to leave behind.

While Shanmugham and Saroja struggled to retain their tenement, other retirees have occasionally requested small advances from their gratuity, citing medical reasons or their children's marriage ceremony. While the deferred gratuity may range from 50,000 to 90,000 rupees, the advance the workers requested to meet their proposed expenses ranged only from 5,000 to 10,000 rupees, or around 10 percent of the total. A few received the requested amount, but most were denied because "the company didn't have enough money." This forced them to rely on their children for money, which was a blow to their attempt to regain autonomy and respect in the plantation society. Complicating the situation, the retirees' children often encouraged their parents to apply for an amount so as to meet large expenses such as their children's education. The failure to get an advance creates animosity within the family, threatening the retirees' attempt to cling to the plantation life by living with their children. In other words, the failure to obtain the advance resulted in further alienation. The following case of Subbaiyya and Parvathi explicates the foregoing concerns of the retirees.

In search of respect: Parvathi and Subbaiyya

Parvathi and her husband, Subbaiyya, were permanent workers in the Valley estate and retired from the service in 2004 and 2000, respectively. While Subbaiyya was born and reared in the Valley estate, Parvathi was brought up in the neighboring Puthumalai estate. They married in 1964, and Parvathi moved to the Valley estate, to which she could transfer her permanent worker status, as one company owned the two

estates. The couple has two sons and two daughters. A daughter and a son were living with their families in the same estate, and Parvathi was staying with the son. The other daughter is married to Parvathi's elder brother's son (*marumakan*), and they live in Puthumalai estate. The other son works as a medical sales representative in Chennai.

Subbaiyya worked in the tea factory for the entire 40 years of his working life. The exposure to tea dust caused him serious respiratory problems,⁶ and he often had to be hospitalized. He told me the plantation manager had given him only 5,000 rupees as an advance from his gratuity. He had to rely on his sons for money for treatment two or three times. Subbaiyya told his sons he would repay the expenditure when he got the gratuity. However, his sons were also affected by the crisis and were unable to positively respond to Subbaiyya's request. Therefore, Subbaiyya had to skip going to the hospital. When I asked why he did not insist his sons take him to the hospital, he said he hated begging (*pichaiedukavirupamillai*). He felt his dignity and self-esteem did not allow him to make repeated requests to his sons. Furthermore, he told me he knew his sons did not have money and they had their own families to look after. He told me, sarcastically, he was suffering because of working in the factories, and he had not received money to treat what had been caused by factory work. Strangely, he was smiling when he told me this, but I know from other workers that Subbaiyya often became irate when the plantation manager denied his requests for an advance payment.

Subbaiyya was often at the forefront of protests organized against the deferral of gratuity payments. He once told me this money he was demanding had been created through him suffocating in factory tea dust (*podikullaninnuvēlai sēncha kāsu*). He was afraid he might die without seeing it (*inthakāsapākkakoduthuvaikkathu pole*). He added that his dead body should not be carried to the cemetery until the company pays his wife the money. If his dead body is carried, it will not burn out of grief. He often repeated this

comment wherever the chance arose. He made a similar statement when a local TV channel reporting on one such protest interviewed him. This statement became popular in the everyday conversation of plantation workers after Subbaiyya's death in 2011. He used to work all 26 workdays in a month. Many people remember him in the khaki uniform he used to wear on the way to the factory and how the dust covered his face as he walked back from the factory to his house. He was remembered as a family man who seldom went to teashops. In the plantation society, refraining from going to a teashop refers to a responsible man who in terms of finances and pleasures puts the important and everyday needs of his family ahead of his own needs. Unfortunately, he passed away without seeing his gratuity. Subbaiyya died in despair.

Indeed, deferred gratuity has become a source of alienation and despair for many retirees who were waiting for death and sought to give something back or leave a memorializing gift that would show their work had meant something, had delivered something, even if it was small and humble. It is in these small, humble gifts that the poor Dalits sought their dignity and autonomy; this is what redeemed work and the sacrifice of work, making it a moral project. The problematization of their gratuity payments led many to feel soiled—that the sacrifice had been futile and they could not redeem themselves and re-dignify themselves properly before death—for this was also a question of a good death, of preparing oneself morally for death, and one did so through straightening gifts, obligations, and debts with family. It is here that the existential pain of poverty is felt, that the hidden injuries of caste and class coalesce.

After Subbaiyya's death, Parvathi complained to different people that the grief of a deferred payout had "killed" him. I visited Parvathi when another informant told me he had often seen her visiting the manager's office demanding both Subbaiyya's and her own payout. Her distress over the payout deferral had put her into turmoil just as it had her husband. In a long conversation, Parvathi described the difficulty

and embarrassment she has experienced while visiting the manager's office. Most often, the manager would not be in the office. Sometimes, the other staff would tell her the manager might come back in an hour or two. She had to wait again but often would not meet the manager even then. If the manager happened to be present, he would send out his personal assistant to inform Parvathi she would be contacted later and didn't need to wait on the office veranda.

In fact, what made her angry was that she was demanding the money she'd toiled for (*uzhaihakāsu*) for the whole 40 years, breaking her back as a tea plucker in the sloppy hills. She told me she (nor any other workers) should not need to bow her head before someone and wait like a dog (*nāimāthirinikkanum*) while demanding her own hard-earned money. She asked me ironically whether she was asking for a share of the ancestral property of the management staff. She was still angry as she described the incident, although she previously received an advance of 10,000 rupees due to her "repeated walk" to the office, which is four kilometers away from the Valley estate. The payout becomes a condensed metaphor of the injustices of existence, of the inability to redeem and control one's circumstances, a total alienation despite all the work.

A few weeks after my conversation with Parvathi, she moved out of her son's house because of what she saw as ill treatment from her daughter-in-law. She went to Puthumalai estate to live with her daughter. I went to Puthumalai to understand the reasons for the shift. She told me she was tired of being insulted by her daughter-in-law—that no one, including her own son, recognized her as a human being (*manusiya yārum mathikkaruthilla*) after her retirement. In the middle of our conversation, Parvathi's daughter left the room to make tea for me. Parvathi used the opportunity to tell me her daughter's husband, Manikkam, wanted to know if Parvathi would transfer the gratuity to him. But she didn't want to promise him the money, since it was the only hope (in her words, "hold") to keep her alive. Parvathi told me Manikkam no longer spoke to her because she had not prom-

ised him the gratuity. She thought she would go back to her son only when she received the gratuity. This is because, as she put it, everyone needs only money, and no one wants to talk to someone who doesn't have money—even your own children. There is a sense in which old people use the promises of gratuity to secure their existence in their old age and the management of these promises becomes increasingly difficult for them, especially with in-laws. As I was preparing to leave after the tea and conversation, Parvathi told me that since her husband passed away, it was her turn to “go into the soil.”

The retirees' alienation is explicit in their complaints that they were not getting the respect and recognition they used to receive in the plantation society. The respect Parvathi demanded in the plantation community at large is specifically expressed in her visit to the manager's office. She associated the lack of respect and recognition to the deferred gratuity—a sign that the economic crisis had alienated them from the plantation life to the extent that they were forced to imagine death as the only way out. By negating the retirement benefits, the plantation company negated the possibility for a dignified livable existence for retired workers. The workers have a personal existential relation with the plantation system in a way that the collapse of the plantation system also meant the collapse of the workers' livelihood, social life, and sense of autonomy and dignity in the world.

Conclusion: Deferred gratuity and the alienated being

It is evident throughout the article that retirees reflect on the crisis not just as a difficult time in their own life. Rather, the crisis and the consequent gratuity deferral forced the retirees to rethink the futility of human life itself. Most of the conversations I had with the retirees had “death” as the dominating theme. I noticed certain aesthetics of death, a certain tragic narrative that captured for them the depths of alienated existence in suffering and sacrifice. The

crisis evoked a strong sense of the futility of human life, of the injustice of not being able to access the financial reward earned and dreamed about whenever women had to climb a steep hill with heavy baskets of tea leaves in the monsoon rain, and the men had to suffocate in the factory's dust. They have suffered low wages, and they contented and mollified themselves with the thought that a small treasure was waiting at the end, and not just for them but also for their families: something would be left for their children that would memorialize their existence and redeem it. The deferred gratuity shattered their hope and meaning of life. It is through the imagination of death and through invoking such a theme to dominate everyday conversation that the retired workers attempt to resist their condition of being alienated.

Meaninglessness, powerlessness, and social isolation are considered major attributes of alienation (Seeman 1959). These are evident in the narratives of everyday life of the retirees. The retirees felt they lacked control over their life situation and that life became meaningless when their gratuity was deferred. They were isolated from wider social relations in the workers' settlement, and their “powerlessness” is evident in their narrative about the futility of life and in the moments when they blame themselves for their life situation. The denial of the self—a major feature of alienation—is evident in all three cases discussed in this article. Most of my informants are critical not only of the whole situation they were in but also of themselves. The intensity of alienation is evident when Saroja laments renting out her brains, when Saraswathi says she is “close to a dead person” and that her life is like that of a beggar, and when Parvathi complains no one treats her like a human being. Alienation seems to be the only phenomena through which the retirees express and experience their life. As Marx observes, “alienation from the self means that the worker does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy” ([1959] 1844: 73).

The ethnography discussed here further suggests that the crisis and the deferred payout ex-

pose the workers to stigmatized forms of their identity. As discussed, the deferred payout is what “expelled” (Sassen 2014) Saraswathi and her family to Tamil Nadu, where they experienced intensive forms of caste discrimination. A close observation of how the retirees experience their alienated life under the crisis shows that the alienation produced by the deferred payout and by their exposure to stigmatized forms of their identity are closely interlinked. This article therefore stresses the importance of having a holistic understanding of alienation of the marginalized as a way to understand the fissures of their everyday life.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Bruce Kapferer, Andrew Lattas, the two anonymous reviewers, and the editor for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this article. The writing of the article was supported by the LSE Department of Anthropology’s Inequality and Poverty Research Programme, funded by the Economic Social Research Council and the European Research Council Starting Grant and led by Alpa Shah and Jens Lerche.

Jayaseelan Raj is Assistant Professor at the Centre for Development Studies, and Research Associate in the Egalitarianism project in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Bergen, where he received his PhD in Anthropology in 2014. He was a postdoctoral research fellow at the London School of Economics and is a coauthor of *Ground Down by Growth* (Pluto Press, 2017).

Email: jraj@cds.ac.in

Notes

1. The retirement benefits include two key components: gratuity and provident fund. Gratuity is calculated by multiplying half the salary of

last three months by the number of years of labor. The workers need at least 180 days of work to qualify for the gratuity. A person retires on completing 40 years of labor or when reaching 58 years of age, whichever comes first. The provident fund is a combination of employer and employee contributions each of 12 percent of the worker’s daily wage.

2. I have used pseudonyms to protect the identity of my informants.
3. However, Taussig recognizes the significance of cultural forms beyond its function as a facilitator of capitalism as the social interpretation of devil help the rural people to interpret capitalism from a vantage point other than the logic of capitalist production relations.
4. This movie became an analogy to refer to the pitiable conditions in plantation society when the workers associated their life situation with various characters in the movie.
5. The Life Insurance Corporation of India is the largest insurance firm fully owned by the Indian government.
6. Medical studies have shown that long-term work in tea factories causes serious respiratory and other health hazards (Jayawardana and Udupihille 1997).

References

- Carrier, James. 1992. “Emerging alienation in production: A Maussian history.” *Man* 27: 539–558.
- Daniel, E. Valentine. 1996. *Charred lullabies: Chapters in an anthropography of violence*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Israel, Joachim. 1971. *Alienation, from Marx to modern sociology: A macrosociological analysis*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Jayawardana, P. L., and M. Udupihille. 1997. “Ventilatory function of factory workers exposed to tea dust.” *Occupational Medicine* 47 (2): 105–109.
- Khan, Nasir. 1995. *Development of the concept and theory of alienation in Marx’s writings. March 1843 to August 1844*. Oslo: Solum Forlag.
- Kohn, Melvin L. 1976. “Occupational structure and alienation.” *American Journal of Sociology* 82: 111–130.
- Lukacs, Georg. (1923) 1971. *History and class consciousness: Studies in Marxist dialectics*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

- Marx, Karl. (1844) 1959. *Economic and philosophic manuscripts of 1844*. Trans. Martin Mulligan. Moscow: Progress Publishers.
- Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. (1846) 1964. *The German ideology*. Ed. and trans. S. Ryazanskaya. Moscow: Progress Publications.
- Mészáros, Istavan. 1970. *Marx's theory of alienation*. London: Merlin Press.
- Ollman, Bertal. 1971. *Alienation: Marx's conception of man in capitalist society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Raj, Jayaseelan. 2014. "Burden of stigma: Crisis, identity and alienation in a south Indian plantation belt." PhD diss., University of Bergen.
- Ram, Kalpana. 2007. "Untimeliness as moral indictment: Tamil agricultural labouring women's use of lament as life narrative." *Australian Journal of Anthropology* 18 (2): 138–153. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1835-9310.2007.tb00085.x>.
- Sangren, Steven P. 1991. "Dialectics of alienation: Individuals and collectivities in Chinese religion." *Man* 26 (1): 67–86.
- Sangren, Steven P. 2000. *Chinese sociologics: An anthropological account of the role of alienation in social reproduction*. London: Athlone Press.
- Seeman, Melvin. 1959. "On the meaning of alienation." *American Sociological Review* 24 (6): 783–791.
- Sassen, Saskia. 2014. *Expulsions: Brutality and complexity in the global economy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Taussig, Michael. 1980. *The devil and commodity fetishism in South America*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.
- Twining, James E. 1980. "Alienation as a social process." *Sociological Quarterly* 21 (3): 417–428. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1533-8525.1980.tb00622.x>.
- Vera-Sanso, Penny. 2006. "Experiences in old age: A south Indian example of how functional age is socially structured." *Oxford Development Studies* 34 (4): 457–472. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600810601045817>.
- Vera-Sanso, Penny. 2007. "Increasing consumption, decreasing support: A multi-generational study of family relations among South Indian Chakkli-yars." *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 41 (2): 225–248. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F006996670704100204>.