

THE REMNANTS OF COLONIAL CAPITAL

Economic Crisis and the Social Reproduction of Alienation in a South Indian
Plantation Belt

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Who are dehumanized for centuries by caste prejudices, racial hatred and imperialist greed

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation is concerned with the present-day situation of Tamil tea plantation workers in Kerala. The plantation Tamils, as they are known locally, belong to *Dalits* (ex-untouchable/outcaste) communities who have been segregated within Indian society and were kept out of socio-economic progress for centuries. This outcaste social status allied with the identity of coolie – a lower category of manual labour – provided a perfect combination to stigmatise their life and confine it into the insulated space of plantations. The recent economic crisis in Indian tea industry that led to temporary closure of many plantations further deteriorated their life. The closure of the plantations forced many of the workers to seek work outside the plantations. Those who decided to stay back sustain through trade union dictated plucking and selling of tea leaves in the closed plantations and through weekly pocket money (which will deducted from monthly payment of the wages) in the partially working plantations. This new situation became a decisive moment for the plantation workers as it put them in an unusual situation where they have to cope-up, renegotiate, and rethink their life in relation to the crisis, à la survivors of any natural calamities. This is a situation when a state of exception is prolonged to an ordinary state of existence (Agamben 1998) where the crisis continues to be an imagined spectre under which the plantation workers partially experience their life today.

The major focus of the research is to identify and delineate the changing nature of the alienation and marginality of the plantation workers in a situation where the nature of plantation as a total institution break down and the workers living in an insulated space of the plantation are exposed to the outside world. My argument is that the workers' alienation in the crisis-context is underpinned in three major processes; *a*). Exposure of workers to the caste-ridden outside society *b*). Transformations in the workers' relation with plantation management, trade unions and State; and *c*). Reintegration of the workers into Dalit migrant workforce outside the plantation system. Accordingly, I contend that the social reproduction of workers' alienation in the crisis-context could be delineated by understanding these processes.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: THE REMNENTS OF COLONIAL CAPITAL

This dissertation is concerned with the present day situation of Tamil tea plantation workers who were transported from the Tamil speaking regions in South India as indentured labourers to the newly developed colonial plantations in the neighbouring state of Kerala. The plantation Tamils, as they are known locally, belong to *Dalit* (ex-untouchable/outcaste)¹ communities who have been segregated within Indian society and were kept out of socio-economic progress for centuries. This outcaste social status facilitated their exploitation as coolie² manual labour during Colonial Rule which compounded their low socially excluded and demeaned position in the colonial order that has continued into post-colonial times. This is particularly evident in the history of the engagement of Dalits in the indentured labour system that brought them into the highly socially-insulated space of the plantation economy.

The recent economic crisis in the Indian tea industry, largely followed upon neo-liberal economic reforms in India (called structural readjustment programmes) led to the temporary closure of many plantations. This is specifically in the case of four major tea producing states in India namely *West Bengal, Assam, Tamil Nadu* and *Kerala*, where the crisis was deeper in its impact. This crisis was a huge blow to their agrarian economy as India is the second largest producer of tea, second only to China,³ and its industry produces fourth of world's tea output and employs 1.26 million people at tea plantations and two million people indirectly (Roy and Das 2009). This crisis thus further disrupted and deteriorated the lives of thousands of tea plantation workers most of whom belong to *Dalits* and *Adivasi* (tribal) communities.

In the case of Kerala, notably in the Peermade tea belt (the region of current study), the crisis forced many of the workers to seek work outside the plantations where most of them had to work as manual/unskilled labourers in informal/unorganised sectors like construction and

¹ Outcaste communities are sub-caste groups who are considered outside the Hindu Varna system (Dumont 1980).

² The term *coolie* in Tamil means 'payment for manual/menial work' (Hoerder 2002). Similar kind of meaning is also attributed in Hindi and Gujrati. The word coolie became widely used to denote indentured workers in colonial plantations all over the world, and today, it is increasingly stigmatised and used as a derogatory reference for menial workers in many societies.

³ India was the largest producer of tea nearly for a century. However, it was surpassed by China by the end of the year 2000.

textile industries. The youth who used to work as temporary workers in the plantation or those who never worked, but were potential workers in the plantation as successors to their parents, found work in skilled but least preferred professions like driving, automobile repairing, tailoring, sales in retails market, and home nursing (baby sitting and nursing of aged/sick people belonging to rich families).

But most workers and their families, who had nowhere to go in search of jobs, had to stay back in the plantations. In the abandoned plantations, they had to survive by collective plucking and selling of tea leaves in a system controlled and administered by trade unions. Similarly, in partially working plantations, where factories were shut down and only plucking is done, they had to content with weekly distributed *chelavu kasu* (pocket money/subsistence income), which in Tamil literally means *money to spend to survive*. In both situations, their livelihood was maintained at the barest subsistence level. The cessation of even the meagre wage-employment offered and the back payment of the wages shattered the conditions of life. The disruption was such as to further impoverish a marginalized population and to make them more intensely vulnerable than before to disease and starvation. Along with utter poverty and famine, the deprivation also includes, unhygienic environment, shattered social life/community relations, and withdrawal of welfare measures including water supply and other protection measures like healthcare benefits which the workers are legally entitled for and were provided by the plantation owners prior to the crisis.

Accordingly, the economic crisis became a decisive event in the plantation life and society, inducing transformations in the existing plantation order and social institutions, producing new institutions/practices in the plantation life and more crucially, exposing the plantation workers to the outside world. Thus the temporary closure of the plantations (and consequent opening up of the hitherto closed and total institutions of the plantations to the outside world) forced the plantation communities into a radical renegotiation and reorganization of the terms of their existence. I stress that the temporary crisis was of cataclysmic proportions to be compared, indeed, with the kind of shock that natural calamities such as earthquakes and tsunamis can have on local populations.

Research focus: the social reproduction of alienation

The major focus of the research is to identify and delineate the changing nature of alienation and marginality of the plantation workers in a situation where the nature of plantation as a total institution break down and the workers living in an insulated space of the plantation are exposed to the outside world. Alienation is an ambiguous and much debated term (cf. Schacht 1970 & 1994; Dolan 1971; Twining 1980; Carrier 1992). By alienation I mean lack of control over one's life situation which is reflected in his/her socio-economic marginality in relation with others in their society. This understanding as it is described here is based on Marx's discussion of the term in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*. For Marx, alienation of worker comes through the independence of the object labour produces (he calls it objectification of the labour) where the worker is related to the product of his labour as an alien object (1844).⁴ By keeping Marx's insights, I emphasize the dispossession (alienation) effected by the capitalist mode of production (Harvey 2000; Kasmir and Carbonella 2008) in the factory-like system of plantations, particularly contextualizing it in the situation of the economic crisis.

At the same time, I do not confine the use of the term as a mere consequence of capitalism and its division of labour. I extend the term alienation to social relations at the local level in which I claim that caste practices and language operate with alienating effect both independently of but also through modernizing processes of a largely capitalist kind. In the case of plantation workers, their alienation is recreated through identities, institutions and authorities which are either part of the plantation production system (e.g. Plantation management and trade unions) or part of socio-political institutions (e.g. Caste and State). But various aspects of this plantation production system and its socio-political institutions are inseparable as they are complementary processes in the plantation system, for example, the use of caste to maintain class order in the plantation. I develop this observation concentrating on three major processes that I contend underpins the alienation of the workers especially discernable in the circumstances of the crisis.

⁴ I am aware of the different use of this term, for instance the use of Durkheimian anomie in social-psychological studies. I should stress here that I am not focusing on the psychic experience of alienation by individuals. Rather, I am using the term for the demeaned position of a group whose life situation is largely depending on others.

The first is the exposure of the plantation workers to caste processes⁵ outside the industrial system of the plantations following the collapse of the plantation order during the crisis. In the plantation system before the crisis, the outcaste status of the workers was reproduced and also significantly transformed in the class order of the plantation system. This created a situation where caste in its *rigid and ritual form* was virtually suspended among the workers for much of the history of plantation work. But this suspension of caste in its original (ritual) form does not mean the absence of caste identity, rather its reconfiguration on different terms. Caste was reformed as a dimension of class relations founded in socio-economic occupational relations specific to the plantation industrial system. But when the insulated nature of plantation life (the plantation as a system in itself) was broken in the context of the crisis, workers were once again exposed to forces of caste as both marking class relations and as additionally forceful in ritually-defined terms.

I stress that the low status and outcaste definition of dalits in the world outside the plantations has a ritual and religious force that intensifies the alienation experienced by dalit or outcaste communities. It is the ritual categorizations of outcaste communities as the impure which yields great stigmatization and effective discrimination in the everyday world outside the plantations. The ending of the plantations as closed productive systems relatively separated from the outside world exposed plantation life to the intrusion of religious/socio-cultural organizations, particularly that of the Hindu nationalist movement into the plantations to organize the workers into a dominant Hindu sankritized ideology. The Hindu nationalist movement aims to unite disorganized multiple Hindu religious groups into one umbrella of Brahmanical Hinduism. As caste in its ritual form is part and parcel of Hindu cosmology, Dalit workers through Hindu nationalism and its sanskritization process are subject to modernizing forces that effectively reproduce them not only as an underclass but as further stigmatized in terms of caste as a ritually defined system. Thus the opening up of the plantation system through the effects of the economic crisis intensifies their exposure to socially demeaning forces that are thoroughly present in the surrounding world.

A second dynamic in the alienation of the dalit plantation workers effected through the crisis is their reintegration in the overall socio economic situation of dalit communities outside the

⁵ The caste system mainly attributed to the social and ritual positions of different category of people in relation to each other in Hindu cosmology is a well discussed phenomenon of the Indian social order (For more details on anthropological discussions on Caste, see Dumont 1980; Dirks 2001; McKim Marriott 1991; Beteille 1996; Ilaiah 1996).

plantations. The crisis forced the workers into the unorganised economic sectors as contract labourers mainly in different parts of south India similar to the movement of underclass Dalits into the unorganised economic sectors in India. This movement of underclass Dalit communities is increased since the neo-liberal reforms perpetuate crisis in some places and opportunities in other, and oscillate the dalit manual workforce accordingly. It is under this situation where the plantation workers find themselves today where they are increasingly merge with this Dalit migrant communities, working particularly in unorganised sectors all over the country.

The third process which I concentrate upon, to delineate the workers alienation in the crisis context, is the shifting relation of the plantation workers to the Plantation owners, State and to the Trade Unions. Here I focus on the way the plantation workers are involved in what I call a net of authorities⁶ who control aspects of the workers' everyday lives. Before the crisis, the *plantation management*⁷ was in full control over workers' lives with occasional interference of the trade unions as a mediator in the plantation management-worker relations. The opening of the insulated space of plantations drastically changed the role of the plantation management when the trade unions and the state have increased their influence in the plantation. The planters although affected by the crisis particularly in its initial period, used the crisis as an excuse to cut down almost all the non-wage benefits given to workers ever since the implementation of plantation labour act in India. In addition, the plantation owners diversified the plantation land to other business ventures such as plantation tourism. The crisis thus became an apparatus that altered the plantation owners' relation with the workers purely in their own favour.

The Federal Government of India provided rescue packages to assist the plantation owners in the crisis. However, no assistance was extended to plantation workers. The Kerala state

⁶ I call them 'net of authorities' because boundaries between these authorities are not rigid. The blurred boundaries between the plantation management, State and trade unions at the local level are evident from its complementary process. It is the trade unions which mediate between the State and the plantation management at the local level. As Philip Abraham's argues, the state comes into being as a structuration within political practice (1977), whereas here the political process primarily means the trade unionism. Further, the trade union also mediates the relationship between plantation management and the workers and also between the State and the workers. So the role of the trade union as a multiple mediator is crucial in understanding the net of authorities. For plantation workers, the net of authorities are subsistence providers, thus integrate the plantation workers into their hierarchical relationship. At the same time, the hierarchy is maintained through the process of their alienation and subordination.

⁷ Plantation management includes different administrative officials from the plantation owner and manager to the field officers and clerks who are above the workers in the occupational hierarchy. In the belt, the term plantation management is interchangeably used to denote planters.

government declared exemptions from certain taxes for tea plantation production and provided certain relief packages for the workers such as five kg of free rice per week in the initial months of the crisis. It also assigned a labour welfare committee to monitor the crisis with regard to welfare concerns. However, the provision of free rice was later reduced and applied only to specific occasions such as national holidays (Independent and Republic Days) and cultural celebrations like Onam⁸ and Christmas. Such provisions did not provide for subsistence requirements. During the crisis, thus, the State had shown more concern for the planters and their enterprise than the concern they showed for the workers' lives. Here, the state acted as a rescue operator or as a neoliberal-corporate state (Kapferer 2005a&b) whose primary and perhaps only responsibility is to bailout the crisis-ridden industry rather than as a sovereign political assemblage of its population (including the workers) that has to guarantee the livelihood rights of the workers.

As mentioned above, in abandoned tea estates, the tea fields were temporarily divided among the *trade unions* who apportioned plots to their members. Being the new administrators of the co-operative tea plucking system, the trade unions increased their influence in the crisis-ridden plantations. That is to say, instead of organising workers against the welfare cuts and the negligence of government, they were acting as commission agents and contractors for trading tea leaves whose production they now organize. Furthermore, the division of tea fields on the basis of trade unions increased antagonism and factionalism among the workers and destroyed their collective solidarity. This paradoxical role of trade unions could be traced to the fact that the trade union leaders in the region belong to Malayalam speaking higher caste communities, living outside the plantations; that is to say, they are not organic to the plantation life. In addition, the trade unions being affiliated to various political parties, they are tied to political interests/electoral politics external to the plantations. This external nature and consequent constraints of trade unions, in fact, subverted the intended cause of trade union activism in the plantations. In this context, it will not be an exaggeration to argue that the trade unions itself became instrumental in a process of the economic restructuring associated with a crisis primarily born of neo-liberal policies.

⁸ Onam is a major cultural festival in Kerala which marks the homecoming of Mahabali, a legendary King of the Malayalam speaking region in South India.

Scope of the research

This study is significant for many reasons. First of all, scholarly research on the plantation system is concentrated mainly on the Americas especially the Antebellum South and the Caribbean. The rapid rise of modern plantations in the exploited colonies of South and Southeast Asia since the second half of the nineteenth century has not been given the attention it deserves (Breman 1989). Similarly, the scholarly literature directly related to tea plantations in Kerala is more discussed in the field of Political Economy (cf. Ravi Raman 2002; Tharakan & George 1986) than it is in any other disciplines of Social Sciences and Humanities such as Anthropology. In short, while the plantations in India did not find a prominent place in anthropological ethnographic research yet, anthropological concerns themselves did not find a place in larger social science research of plantations in India.

Furthermore, although recent historiographic trends, like that of the subaltern project (Guha 1997) try to capture the workers life in the plantation diachronically as part of larger subaltern groupings, an anthropological/ethnographic study of plantation life in South India is yet to be carried out to understand the details of how the plantation workers situate themselves locally in the social arena of the plantation system. My research is a modest attempt in this regard to bring south Indian plantations into anthropological literature and anthropological concerns of plantation systems into social science research in India.

While understanding the political-economic dynamics of the plantation system, such as plantation production and its relations in a wider capitalist commodity chain, are important to the understanding of workers in their changing role in the capitalist economic system; the anthropological observations on how workers face the crisis and how they encounter what I call as their 'net of authorities' (which comprise trade unions, plantation management, and the State) in the context of the crisis provides a framework to understand unwritten rules/agreements/disagreements that mediates capitalist economic system at the grass root level. Accordingly, this study focuses on an ethnographic account of the workers' lives during the crisis and in a way similar research carried out by Sidney Mintz in the Caribbean where he stresses the socio-cultural circumstances of the workers as critical in understanding the productive relations and not merely concentrating on plantation as an abstract system of material production (1989).

Furthermore, most of the accounts on the plantation life in the region are written either by colonial officers and planters (Mayne 1953; Lovett 1972) or by native planters (Muthaih 1993). All these writings represent the planters' struggle for plantation development and these writings do not provide much description of the plantation workers' life. As Ann Stoler rightly points out, while the colonial accounts portray an entrepreneurial success story of rough and rugged men allured by risk, adventure, and promises of easy-won wealth, such an account obscures the more telling features of estate expansion, namely, the coalescence of a highly sophisticated organization of corporate capital and a pervasive and coercive form of labour control (1985: p 15). So I focus here on the workers' struggle and the coercive form of labour control since a major concern in the research is to understand the social reproduction of the hierarchical order and consequent workers' alienation in the plantation system.

The plantation as an early enclave of transnational-capitalist production system provides ample scope for comparative studies with similar modern day enclaves like business processing centres, special economic zones, and techno parks/cyber cities which could unravel the transformations in flowing patterns of capital and commodities and the production of labour associated with it. In this context, this study is imperative as it is not only a research on capitalist production relation induced by colonialism; but it also explores the very economic crisis that is perpetuated by the neo-liberal economic system.

Moreover, seen against the background of anthropologists' increasing interest in global links and transnational flows, it seems remarkable how few ethnographers have paid much attention to the global economic restructuring (Martinez 2007). This is evident from recent anthropological confessions that the study of class and social inequality has fallen out of favour in anthropology (Kasim and Carbonella 2008) and class movement has been outsourced to sociology (Trouillot 2003). In this context, understanding the latest manifestation of capitalist production in the plantation system under study, and the class inequality it generates, is imperative in anthropological research today.

Research methodology

This dissertation is based on six-month multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork which was carried out from June to December, 2009 among tea plantation workers in five tea estates namely Thangamalai, Koliakanam, Pasumalai, Ashly, and Koduakarnam in the Peermade tea belt in Kerala. The five tea estates were selected to accommodate local differences inherent to the

economic crisis. The first two estates (Thangamalai and Koliekanam) represent totally abandoned plantations. The third one (Pasumalai) represents early abandoned one that was recently taken over by a new company which is in its initial stage and confined the working to the field. The last two (Ashly and Koduakarnam) represent partially working plantations with reduced working days and production under the old company.

The principle method was that of participant observation further supported by the fact that I was born and raised in a plantation Tamil household. The adoption of this method has, of course, taken note of the extensive post-modern critique of this conventional anthropological method, where it questions the authority of the foreign researcher and the authenticity of the native voice presented (cf. Geertz 1975; Clifford & Marcus 1986). At the same time, this post-modern or linguistic turn in Anthropology constrains the understanding of culture as part of a larger society since it insists on cultural interpretation of the internal life of the locale (cf. Marcus 1998). In fact, it is imperative to consider the 'social' since the experience of human life transcends specific elements of culture and is conditioned by the society at large. For instance, in the case of plantation workers under study, although they live in the insulated space of plantations relatively sealed off from the surrounding realities of mainstream Kerala society, this does not mean that dynamics of plantation life are restricted to the insulated space, neither does it mean that the divisiveness or the solidarity are explicable solely by forces that are internal to the community (Martnez 2007).

The participant observation method will also bring in Bourdieu's phenomenologically reflexive approach to participant observation (Bourdieu 1977). More to the point, being a person born and brought up in the tea plantation, I hope I was able to overcome many hurdles usually faced by outside researchers in understanding the social world of the plantation. However, I believe that being an insider or an outsider have their own advantages as well as disadvantages. An outsider will be able to question many of the processes that, I as an insider, take for granted. At the same time, I, as an insider, will be able to understand the meaning of certain processes in local terms much better than an outsider.

Major methods which were used in the fieldwork based research are:

Participant observation: It was used as a primary method of enquiry. As my focus is on the *practices* in the social domain, I closely observed the local practices while also being involved

in them. The major arenas in this regard were the work in the field and factories in the tea plantations, community meetings of various groups (political, religious, and self help etc.), home visits, play grounds, festivals and local markets in the nodal townships.

Oral Interviews: Oral interviews were used widely in data collection since most of the archival records/history of the tea belt was written by colonial planters. Plantation owners, mediating field officers and supervisors, plantation workers, trade union representatives, and state representatives at various levels related to the plantations were interviewed. Other individuals and groups like serious students of plantation studies found relevant in the field were also interviewed.

Archival Records: As plantation development goes back to the colonial period, I had to closely look into the plantation documents like letters of correspondence between the government, British Resident and planters; papers of legislative council proceedings; Acts and Proclamations regarding Plantation; and Census and Statistics. Thiruvananthapuram State Archives, Legislative Assembly Library and library of Planters Association of Kerala (UPASI) were visited to collect the primary documents.

Statistics: Statistics, along with other methods were used to reflect on observations, propositions and conclusions in the field. I think the use of statistics is also useful in adding credibility to an argument.

All the methods discussed above are used altogether to appreciate a process since only a totalization of knowledge can elucidate the internal coherence and external articulations of a system (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992).

CHAPTER TWO

PLANTATION DEVELOPMENT IN KERALA: POPULAR HISTORY AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Indentured servitude and colonial plantations

The indentured labour system,⁹ a soft version of slavery was an integral element to the establishment of colonial plantations, particularly in the Caribbean Islands, Southeast Asia, South Asia and Southern Africa. The indenture labour system was jointly financed by the planters and the colonial government to replace the African Slave system after the abolition of slavery in the British Empire in 1833 and in the French colonies in 1848 (Jayawardena 1963; Hoerder 2002). Being the largest component of Indian emigration during the colonial era (Guilmoto 1993), Tamil indentured workers – who mostly belonged to outcaste communities - were sent to coffee, sugar and tea plantations around Indian ocean particularly to Ceylon (Srilanka), Malaya (Malaysia), Burma (Union of Myanmar) and princely state of Travancore (the South Indian state of Kerala). A comparatively lower number of Tamil workers were also received by Fiji, Guyana and Mauritius whereas these countries received much of their labour force from northern India (cf. Mayer 1961; Jayawardane 1963; V. Lal 1993).

Under the indenture system, the workers were treated nearly as slaves. In the Caribbean plantations, a coolie whose performance was unsatisfactory owing to absence or negligence was liable, upon the report of the manager to the magistrate, to a fine not exceeding \$ 24 or two months of hard labour. Moreover, absence from the plantation for more than a week without permission constituted ‘desertion’, an offence punishable by a fine or imprisonment or both (Jayawardena 1963). Similarly, in Fijian plantations, an ordinance in 1886 made it unlawful for more than five workers employed in the same plantation to absent themselves without the consent of the employer, and the workers were considered as the property of the employers (V.Lal 1993).

The case of the workers in the Peermade tea belt was also not different. As described by Sundaram, 79 years old retired male tea plantation worker in Thangamalai Estate, the

⁹ As the word implicates, indentured labour system is a contract between the worker and the owner on the terms and condition of the work. The contract was totally favorable to the planters and the workers were not aware of many terms of the contract. They found it deceptive and nearly impossible to withdraw due to workers’ Brach of Contract Act. For this reason, the indentured labour system is also called indentured servitude (Bremen 1989). These contracts were primary instruments of disciplining and stabilizing the worker force (Munro 1993).

employers had close alliance with the local police who were like henchmen for the employers. The police upon the complaint of the employers used to abuse the workers physically and verbally without enquiring whether the worker is guilty or not. This intimidation of workers also helped to literally silence the voices of workers against their ill-treatment. There were virtually no other alternative avenues to work open to plantation labourers. Also, the workers' free choice is constrained with lack of better choices, whether inside or outside the plantation system. Accordingly, the argument in defence of the indenture labour system advocated by the pro-capitalist scholars, planters and colonial/post colonial State, that the indenture system is not slavery because the individual have free choice of providing his/her labour is not convincing.

While nearly one third of the indentured workers returned to Tamil Nadu in the first half of twentieth century, the majority stayed back in the plantations perhaps due to the subsistence security that is provided there which was absent in caste-ridden rural village production system in Tamil Nadu. Likewise, during the power transition from colonial empires to the local people after the Second World War, almost all Tamil workers from Burma and a significant number from Sri Lanka were expelled and were transported back to India. This expulsion and the formation of post-colonial state became a decisive moment for the second/third/fourth generation Tamil plantation workers as they developed as a least accepted minority citizenry in the newly formed countries, notably in Kerala, Sri Lanka and Malaysia. However, Kerala as a federal state of Indian Union just as Tamil Nadu enabled the workers in the Peermade tea belt to retain their relation with Tamil Nadu and/or to imagine their life more in relation to that of their relatives in Tamil Nadu, contrary to the Tamil plantation workers in Malayasia and Sri Lanka.

Plantation development and indenture system in Kerala

The history of the tea industry in Kerala goes back to the second half of the 19th century. In 1863, British colonial officials of the Madras Presidency (in which northern part of modern Kerala was then incorporated) and British missionaries (Rev. Henry Baker and his sons being the first ones) established coffee plantations in the highland forest region of Peermade (then known as Hills of Central Travancore inhabited by tribes called *Mala-Arayans* and *Mannans*) in the princely state of Travancore. This was made possible through the strong lobbying and negotiation of Colonel Munro (who was a relative of Rev. Baker), then British Resident (the

official representative of the British Empire) with the *Dewan* (Chief Minister) of the princely state of Travancore. In short, the development of plantations in the region was the result of the flow of missionary capital through the colonial bureaucracy in Kerala.

The numbers of workers were relatively kept low till the tea cultivation found a prominent place in Kerala with the decline of coffee cultivation in the early 1870s. This decline in coffee cultivation, due to a leaf disease called *Hemileia Vastatrix* and cheap import of Brazilian coffee in the international market, was the beginning of tea becoming a prominent plantation crop. As tea cultivation was more labour intensive than coffee cultivation, more and more workers from outcaste communities in Tamil speaking regions of South India were brought to the plantation through *Kankani system*.¹⁰ Since most of these outcaste people were working under bonded labour system¹¹ (Kumar 1965) and they have relatively huge debt, they were given advance amount by the *Kankanies* to payback their bondage debts to free themselves from their masters to come to the plantation. Ironically, the operation of this advance money created another debt-bondage system in the plantation. Consequently, under what is referred as Planters' *Raj* (rule), the planters were able to retain the workforce through this bondage system which was favoured by the existing socio-political system of the time. It is argued by some scholars that the abolition of slavery and bonded labour system in Madras Presidency in 1853 was aimed at mobilizing enough workers for the colonial plantations (Bremen 1989; Kumar 1965; Ravi Raman 2002). This could be read as a universal phenomenon when it is compared to the abolition of slavery in southern United States in 1865 to provide workforce for the industrial north.

¹⁰ In *Kankani System*, workers were recruited to the plantation through agents called *Kankani* which means overseers. As the name suggests, these local recruiters often worked as overseers (supervisors) in the plantation. These *kankanies* were usually the indigenous elites belong to the same or right above the caste of the workers. They are also called *maistries* and *sardaris* in different places of similar plantation development. It is these recruiters who maintained informal and personal ties with the workers of their group to guarantee labour control and occupational hierarchy in the plantation production.

¹¹ A person becomes a bonded labourer when his or her labour is demanded as a means of repayment for a loan. The person is then tricked or trapped into working for very little or no pay, often for seven days a week. In South Asia, it took roots in the caste system and continues to flourish in feudal agricultural relationships. The bonded labour system was not merely a system under which the debtor is presumed to have entered into an agreement with the creditor for work. But it was a social obligation for the outcastes as they were socially restricted from land ownership, and thus a completely forced one. The debt continued for years, and usually an entire family is responsible for the debt. The bonded labour could be sold and mortgaged. So it was no less than slavery. The words for bonded laborers in Tamil such as *Pannaiyal*, *Padiyal*, *Adiyanmaar*, *Adimai* etc, which colloquially means slave/slave-like servant indicates the existence of slave system. For a detailed discussion of bonded labour system, see Kumar 1965 and Sastri 1955.

In this regard, there is an important debate among scholars concerning whether the outcaste communities were forced into the plantation system or actively chose to enter it in order to escape the inequities of caste.¹² The planters and pro-liberal scholars argued that the entry of outcastes into the indenture system in fact freed them from bonded slavery (Muthaiah 1993; Lovett 1972, UPASI publications; Galenson 1984; Emmer 1986). Others disagree with this claim and argue that indentured labour has merely been a bonded slavery under another name (Pandian 1990; Breman 1990; Raviraman 2010). I agree with the latter argument. The indenture system was devised and imposed by capitalist interests operating through colonial rule. It exploited a caste system within which outcaste communities had no choice. The outcaste status is an indicted one, rather than chosen and this outcaste status of the workers is what facilitated the complicity of these Tamil communities into the plantation system.

Furthermore, the labourers were given false information about their destinations and the nature of plantation work (Erik Baak 1997, p 11). The workers have been given an alluring colourful picture of plantation life although the real situation proved to be completely the opposite. Many of the workers died of malaria, fever and dysentery while clearing the forest. Their families were not compensated nor were any medical assistance given to the ill-workers. Also, the workers were not provided with decent housing and sanitation facilities (Erik Baak 1997). The labour process there was arduous and exhausting. Work was extracted from the labourers with a machine-like precision and any fault detected being dealt with severely (Ravi Raman 2002).

No state intervention had been made in this regard to improve the workers' situation. This is not surprising not only because of the supremacy of the British authority over the Travancore state, but mainly because the workers belong to outcaste social groups which when we read it in its spatial-temporal contexts, were considered as 'slaves' just like their counterparts in the southern part of the U.S. a century ago. Accordingly, although the indentured labour established a class system rather than a traditional caste system, nonetheless it recreated a situation of bonded slavery, but in another social and political register.

No wonder, many workers tried to run away from the plantation due to this inhuman treatment and the severe labour condition in the plantation. However, the bondage of

¹² A detailed analysis of this debate is carried out in Paul E Baak's article (1999) '*About Enslaved Ex-Slaves, Uncaptured Contract Coolies and Unfreed Freedmen*'.

plantation workers was ensured through financial indebtedness (i.e, debt-bondage) and severe sanctions against any threat to withdraw labour power. Most important in this regard was the Travancore criminal breach of contract act which was passed in 1865, the very year in which the tea plantations expanded in Peermade. Under the Act, it was a crime for workers to break their contract of employment to the plantation companies. A Magistrate's Court was established in Peermade by the Travancore State for the express purpose of prosecuting workers under the terms of the Act. The Act effectively prevented employees leaving the plantations for alternative work. Moreover, the Act advanced no security or protection against exploitation. The Act was only repealed in 1935 following pressure from international agencies especially the League of Nations. In addition, the Coffee Stealing Prevention Act prohibited workers from possessing coffee from the plantations, and thus alienated them from any kind of possession of what they contribute to produce. This is in fact a symbolic act which reinforces the dehumanising idea that the plantation workers were (meant) to be only bare labourers who just survive to labour. Furthermore, the coffee stealing act presented the plantation workers as potential criminals: the coolie beast who needs to be tamed (Breman 1989). This criminilization of the poor and the generation of stigma through the image of the poor as wild and immoral is widely explored in anthropological/social research recently (Escobar 1995; Broch-Due 2000; O'Connor 2002; McNish 2008; Katz 1989; Haney 2002).

Ganesan, one of the eldest ex-plantation workers in Ladrum estate who lives with his son working in the plantation now, told me that as far as he could remember the situation of plantation workers in the 1940s and 50s, they were treated like *adimai* (slaves) in the plantation. Around three to five families were required to live in each tiny tenement of a long barrack or line.¹³ The family size was big at that time comprising at least nine members in each family. A minimum of two families in a tenement means that there were at least 18 persons who were living in each tiny tenement. But now they live in a larger space as the average numbers of members in families have decreased to five and each family were allocated a separate tenement.

Ganesan further told me that they were not offered enough rice and pulses (distributed as a major substitute for wages) in the plantation. The resistance against this denial of rice was carried out in the Pasumalai estate in the year 1953, where the planter denied food allocation

¹³ As mentioned earlier, the workers live in divided tenements of barracks like structure called layam (lines).

for the children of the workers. The resistance came to be popularly called *Pillai-arisi samaram* (Struggle for rice for children). According to Meenakshi, 72 years old female worker who participated in the resistance event and witnessed the massacre, the resistance was broken by police fire which resulted in the death of more than ten workers (newspapers at the time reported the death of only three, see Ravi Raman 2010). Kanakamma, a women worker who is also the daughter of Ponnayya - one of the victims of the firing -told me that this massacre became an inspiring symbol for further agitations in the following decades; even today the massacre is a major reference in trade union slogans and speeches in the Peermade tea belt.

Native planters, post-colonial state and the workers

Although, Europeans dominated the plantation economy during its early stage, Indian elites particularly Brahmins, Syrian Christians¹⁴, and a few Nadars¹⁵ began to gain access to plantation ownership by the beginning of the twentieth century. However, European planters remained the dominant controlling element of the plantations until the beginning of 1970s. The native planters challenged the European monopoly joining it to nationalist discourse. The *Dewan* of Travancore State wrote that ‘the preference will be given to the *subjects* of the Travancore State in the registration of land suitable for the cultivation of plantation crops’ (quoted in Erik Baak 1997, p 172). The benefit of this indigenous sentiments and the fight against the supremacy however were confined to the benefit of Brahmin, Nayar and Syrian Christian communities. In opposite, the workers of outcaste communities were never conceived as *subjects* in this regard, and the question of their rights never came into discussion.

The major transition from foreign European control of the plantations to native owners occurred with the formation of Kerala state in 1956.¹⁶ Some modifications to this development, however, were threatened by the communist government who led land redistribution of the large land holdings to the landless peasants and tenants. Moreover, there was a serious call for nationalisation of plantations, particularly the ones which were still

¹⁴ The Syrian Christians (also called Nasrani) belong to Syriac tradition of Christianity who were believed to be originally converted to Christianity by St.Thomas.

¹⁵ Nadar, also known as Shanars, is a south Indian caste ranked below Shudras in the Hindu caste hierarchy. However, majority of Nadars converted to Christianity during the Colonial years. Famous plantation poineers A.V. Thomas and P.D. Devasahayam belongs to Christian shanar community.

¹⁶ The state of Kerala was formed by bringing together Malayalam speaking regions in post colonial India.

owned by foreigners. This proposal was proposed by the well known communist leader A.K. Gopalan, but was strongly opposed by the Congress party and of course, by the planters' associations. The new plantation owners, fearing the loss of their plantations and other institutions they controlled, lobbied against the communist led government through a massive political agitation that started in 1958 called *vimochana samaram* (Liberation Struggle a.k.a. Christian and Nayar led Moral Rearmament Movement) with the support of the Congress Party. Even though the liberation struggle was organised mainly in opposition to the education reforms and land reform, nonetheless it targeted the left movement as a whole (Menon 1967). The active role played by UPASI (United Planter's Association of South India) in the liberation struggle vouches their fear of trade union movement, particularly the radical one (*relatively*) led by the communist party.

As part of the agitation, massive rallies and demonstrations against the government took place throughout the state. The immediate effect of the *Vimochana Samaram* was the dismissal of the Communist government in July 1959 by the President of India following the recommendation of the Nehru-led Congress government. The next government in Kerala led by the Indian National Congress ratified the private holding of plantations through the Kerala Agricultural Relations Act, thus strengthening the plantation owner's position. Consequently, plantations were neither subjected to land reform nor were they nationalized. It should be noted that the communist led government and its leaders were only interested in the nationalisation of foreign owned plantations, and the question of inclusion of native owned plantations in the land reform never arose in their political discussion. Accordingly, the position of communist leaders in this regard was based on anti-colonial sentiments rather than pro-workers/poor sentiment. Accordingly, the plantation workers were completely out of the development discourse and practice and thus became marginal to the Kerala State and Society.

This was so despite the fact that trade union action did produce improvements to the work conditions, especially as compared with plantations elsewhere in India. Nonetheless, the stigmatization and general alienation of the tea plantation workers from the control over the circumstances of their existence continued. The structure of control simply moved from foreign elites to local elites and these effectively continued the same practices. As we will see in the fourth chapter, the trade union leadership consists of people from Malayali speaking higher caste which distanced the workers from trade unions. Consequently most Tamil

workers supported Travancore Tamilnad Congress, a party struggling to exclude Tamil inhabited regions from the new state of Kerala (Erik Baak 1997, p 236).

In addition, with the changeover of the plantations to indigenous ownership, the social hierarchy of wider Indian/Kerala society (i.e. caste order) began to intrude into the social/industrial order of the plantations. Accordingly, this take over of the plantations by the native planters lead to intensify the plantation order through caste and thus the plantations under the traditional local elites were also isolated from the reforms affecting caste hierarchy, such as the SNDP movement in Kerala and Dravidian movement in Tamil Nadu.

Land reform, the Kerala Development Model and the plantation workers

The plantation society should be considered as an extraordinary social process which is produced from the land/social space which the workers do not own or control. This alienation from land that they have inhabited over five generations is inextricably linked to the interplay between land and caste (Kumar 1965; Pandian 1990) and more importantly the historically evolved pattern of landholding in the region. It was the Europeans and the non-untouchable elites (that includes high caste Hindus and Syrian Christians in Kerala) who were socially legitimised to own land. The planters from these communities were successful in lobbying for huge area of land for the plantations and subsequently they were granted these lands at throw-away prices or even without any price at all (Ravi Raman 2010). By contrast the outcastes were alienated from land ownership with high social legitimacy and became a cheap source of labour for the privileged class of planters.

As mentioned above, plantations were successfully excluded from the much acclaimed state mediated land reform in Kerala in the 1950s and 60s by arguing that the plantations are the most productive area of agricultural economy and the advantage of mass production (economies of scale) would be lost if they are included in the land reform (Franke & Chasin 1989; Heller 1999). In other words, abolishing plantation system was referred as *killing a goose that laid the golden eggs* (Erik Baak 1997). Thus the outcaste communities were largely excluded from the processes of land reform and redistributive systems, and it failed to yield any benefits for the *Dalit* plantation workers and *adivasi* (indigenous/tribal) communities. Paradoxically the plantations were established on the same land which was owned by the indigenous communities who were displaced from the land in the early phases of plantation

development. As Ravi Raman states, whatever be the arguments for excluding the plantations from land reform, they are mere weak justifications for leaving out a vital piece of legislation (Ravi Raman 2010). In sum, despite the egalitarian reformism for which Kerala is famous, elites in Kerala persisted the exploitation structures that Kerala prided itself on attempting to reform.

Furthermore, the workers' attempt to occupy waste lands outside the plantations was vehemently opposed by the planters and they subverted the attempts with the help of local police. In 1984, the government owned revenue lands in a mountain top outside the Ashly estate were occupied by 14 plantation workers to plant cardamom and pepper as an attempt to become independent income earners. But it was opposed by the management of Ashly estate who warned the workers with dire consequences if they continue to occupy and carry out any plantations of their own. They were given written memos in this regard. As the workers, who were also active in trade union movements, carried on in their attempt by building small huts in the occupied land, the estate management filed a case with the police against the land encroachment although the land does not belong to Ashly estate. The police intimidated the workers and finally succeeded in displacing the workers from the occupied land.

Murugan who led the 14 workers in the occupation and who was an office peon in the Estate office told me that he was fired from his office position and transferred to hard menial labour as a warning. He also added that the estate management tried to vacate the workers from the occupied land because the management wanted to merge the government revenue land into the estate land (ie. encroaching the government land). It again demonstrates that the workers are not allowed nor socially legitimized to own the land, a strong continuation of the primary manifestation of caste hierarchy. Murugan was targeted because he was one of the few literate in the plantation who realised the importance of land ownership for socio-economic progress in the Indian context. He further told me that the workers are unable to even apply for a bank loan since they do not own land to submit it as a collateral security for the bank loan. In fact, the whole incident shows clear continuity with the above described coffee stealing act of 1865, as in both these cases the workers were literally barred to possess or own material assets, and thus they were to remain in a position of limbo with only barest means of subsistence. In short, whatever be the reasons behind their way into the plantation system the workers were landless in the places where they came from, and continue to be landless where they came to.

The workers' exclusion could be also seen in the much acclaimed Kerala Development Model of socio-economic development. Kerala Development Model is an idea/label that refers to Kerala's outstanding performance in many human development indicators which could be equated with developed countries like Norway and the U.S, even in the midst of very lower per-capita income relative to other Indian states (Sen 2001; Franke & Chasin 1989; Heller 1999). When compared to other Indian states, Kerala is known in this regard for its almost universal literacy rate, highest sex ratio, lowest mortality and fertility rate, and highest life expectancy (Kerala Development Report 2008). The role of state (both pre and post-colonial), Christian missionaries/other social movements and revolutionary land reform are credited to this Kerala Model. But they are met with criticism on many grounds that expose the mythic elements of the Kerala Development Model (Kurien 1995; Tsai 2006; Venkatraman 2008) revealing its ideological role in maintaining certain structures of inequality. For instance, as we will see in the next chapter in detail, human development indicators of the plantation workers in Peermade are much below the state average of the indicators and thus untouched by the Kerala Development Model. Hence, whatever the radical development initiatives have been so far, the experience of the plantation workers with land reform and the Kerala development model shows that they will remain excluded from development initiatives.

Furthermore, I underline the continuing exclusion of plantation workers from the Kerala Development Model discourse itself. An outstanding example comes from the Kerala Development Report-2008 published by the planning commission of India. The core committee responsible for the report even failed to acknowledge plantations workers or *Dalits*- an encompassing label for outcaste communities to which most of the plantation workers belong - in the very section titled outlier communities in the report (KDR 2008, p 43). In that section, only *adivasis* and *fisherfolks* are discussed, totally overlooking Tamil plantation workers (or larger Dalit communities). The report was published at a time (2008), when the subject of suicides amidst the abject poverty of the plantation workers was receiving wide attention in the media. While it is widely accepted that the Dalits were left out of the Kerala development initiatives (Ram Mohan 2008; Omvedt 2006), the leaving-out of Dalits from the outlier community discussion/registration in the official development report published by the State illustrates that the State and its institutions (that includes bureaucratic and policy research institutes) is itself composed on the interest of dominant caste/religious

groups, and they are not value-free entities which are outside the scope of becoming a tool for ethnic based discrimination.

In short, the foregoing history of the plantation workers shows that they always remained an underclass and were continuously kept in the same position in colonial as well as post colonial regimes. They were obscured in the history of plantation development by the narratives of adventurous stories of European and native planters. Similarly, today, they are obscured by their exclusion in the narratives of 'Kerala Development Model and its outliers'.

CHAPTER THREE

PEERMADE TEA BELT: THE LOCAL SETTING

Peermade,¹⁷ known as the tea pot of Kerala, is one of the most important tea producing regions in South India. It is located in Idukki District, the second largest *Zilla* (administrative division) of Kerala¹⁸ state, and is also one of the four *Taluks* (local administrative units) of Idukki District. Peermade is known outside of Kerala for its proximity to Periyar Wildlife Sanctuary¹⁹ (popularly called *Thekkady/Periyar Tiger Reserve*) and also to *Sabarimala*,²⁰ one of the largest (Hindu) pilgrimage centres in the world. It is located only 35 kilometres northwest of *Periyar Wild Life Santuary* and around 55 kilometres northwest of *Sabarimala*. Moreover, Peermade is only 30 kilometres from Kumily, the border town between Kerala and Tamil Nadu which acts as a transit point for Kerala's commercial transactions from Tamil Nadu and other States. During pre-independent era, it was in Peermade hill station where the summer palace - called *Ammachi Kottaram* - of the *Maharajah* (The Royal King) of *Thiruvathancoore* (The Princely state of Travancore) was located. In addition to these features, the wild and exotic landscape of Peermade makes this high land a famous tourist destination that draws both foreign and domestic tourists. Unsurprisingly Peermade is placed in the officially recognised tourist destinations of Kerala. See the map below:

¹⁷ Peermade means hill of Peer and it is named after a Sufi saint Peer Muhammad. It is pronounced as Peerumedu in Tamil as well as in Malayalam. It should be noted that the plantations were established in other high ranges of Kerala as well. The plantations in Wayanad, *Kannan Devan Hills* around Munnar town in Idukki district and *Agasthya Hills* near Thiruvananthapuram are also famous as tea plantation regions. But the study here is confined only to plantations in the Peermade region for the sake of short term ethnographic study.

¹⁸ Kerala, which lies in the south western tip of India, is one of the small states of India accounting for nearly 1.8 percent of its territory and 3.1 percent of its population. The state came into existence on November 1, 1956 consequent to the reorganisation of states on linguistic basis (Kerala Development Report 2008)

¹⁹ Unfortunately, there was a big boat tragedy in Thekkady Lake during my fieldwork days near the place. The disaster that happened on September 30 2009 took the lives of 45 tourists.

²⁰ Sabarimala is located in the Western Ghats with estimated 40 million devotees coming every year.



(Map 3.1: Kerala's Tourist Destinations. Peermade is spotted in the map)

All the very first ten websites that appears in the *Google search* engine for the word 'Peermade', are websites meant for tourists, the thing that portrays Peermade as a popular hill station with beautiful tea gardens²¹ infusing a strong desire to be visited.²² This domination of tourist enterprises over cyberspace conceals the stories of economic crisis and the socioeconomic underdevelopment of the region that may shield the lustre of its touristic highlights. These stories of poverty and underdevelopment of the workers, especially in the context of the economic crisis form the primary concern of this thesis.

The place of Peermade in Kerala's imagination

Despite the foregoing importance of Peermade region as a tourist destination, the region is seen as a culturally and socially backward space. Widespread opinion in Kerala is that

²¹ Tea estates are deceptively called tea gardens in the tourist brochure (Daniel 2008).

²² For instance, the websites that appear in the Google search in the very first page are <http://www.peermade.info/>, <http://www.hillstationsinindia.com/south-india-hill-stations/peermade.html>, <http://www.tourism-of-india.com/peermade.html>, <http://www.stayhomz.com/peermade-hills.htm>, <http://www.world66.com/asia/southasia/india/kerala/peermade>, <http://www.hillresortsinindia.com/peermade.html>, <http://www.kerala-go-holidays.com/kerala-hill-holidays/peermade.html>

civilization took root in the fertile plains whereas the forest and hill regions harbour “primitive” tribal populations or else those of low social origin. This opinion might have emanated from the demographic composition of the tea belt with tribes and Dalits forms the major share. Around 60% of the population in the Peermade *Taluk* belong to Dalit/adviasi groups which also includes large portion of plantation workers (National Census 2001). The rest of the 40% belongs to other communities who were migrated to Peermade region in the wake of the plantation development. In other words, those who inhabit the Peermade region are either the indigenous population (adviasi community) or people brought to the region as part of the plantation development (Dalits as workers and part of Syrian Christians and ezhava/nadars as managers, clerks and technical workers) or those who established markets for the plantation people (Tamil higher caste that includes Vellalas/Gounders/Nadars, part of Syrian Christians, and Tamil/Malayalam speaking Muslims).

The larger representation of the backward communities among the inhabitants of Peermade tea belt reflects the inferior portrayal of the place in many contexts. To provide an example, many of the students from this tea belt- and also those from Munnar,²³ another tea producing highland region in Idukki district- who got a chance to continue their studies in urban centres in Kerala are met with inferior treatment when their fellow students come to know that they come from *Malampradesam* (high lands) of Idukki. This is similar to the experience of those who come from Wayanad District which is known as the land of tribal communities. While the economic backwardness and lack of the infrastructural facilities relative to the plain is a fact, stereotypical presentation of Peermade high range as something wild/exotic and the inferior portrayal of the tea belt in relation to its economic backwardness is what stigmatise the Peermade region.

In the words of one of my informants (a friend who lives in *Cochin*, an urbanised centre of transnational commercial activities in Kerala, and who received an elite private education at high school level and pursued his Bachelor degree in an elite private college located in Peermade region),²⁴ “It is a nice place to visit, but not to live in forever.” He added, “it is

²³ In addition to Peermade, Munnar is another Tamil populated plantation town (referred as Tamil Pocket in Kerala) and a potential case to understand the Tamil plantation workers in Kerala. However, Munnar tea belt was comparatively less affected by the economic crisis than Peermade tea belt for various reasons that will be discussed in the fourth chapter.

²⁴ Although, Peermade and adjoining areas have highly reputed educational institutions, these are meant for students from affluent families from the low land region. This is in parallel to famous international schools in Ooty and Kodaikanal run by Christian missions for the children from affluent families all over the world.

because of its hilly terrain, chilly weather, lack of proximity to urban centres, rural atmosphere, and lack of infrastructural/technical resources such as frequent (electric) power cut and poor internet connectivity.” In fact, my friend also suggested me to buy a small housing plot in the plain region in order not to suffer in the inaccessible wild region. No wonder, many punishment transfers in the government bureaucracy and other institutions are given to relatively inaccessible highland regions (such as Peermade) in Idukki and Wayanad districts. This stigma is paradoxical in Kerala’s context as Kerala has the lowest urban-rural gap in India (Kannan 2000).

Furthermore, as argued earlier, it will not be an exaggeration to state that Peermade tea belt is an outlier to the famous Kerala Development Model. The socioeconomic underdevelopment of this region is evident from its comparative backwardness in the very human development indicators that the widely acclaimed Kerala Development Model²⁵ is known for. While the state average literacy rate according to the latest census report of 2001 is 93% which is the highest of a state in India, the average literacy rate in Peermade is only 73%, is a prime example in this regard (my own calculation based on National Census 2001 statistics). In addition, there is no railway transportation available and no airports in Idukki district. The nearest railway station is Kottayam which is 70 km away from Peermade and the nearest airport is Cochin which is located 180 km away from Peermade. This is in contrary to comparatively developed low land region in Kerala. No wonder that Idukki is the most scarcely populated District in Kerala with a population density below 400 people/km² (<http://www.prokerala.com/kerala/population.htm>).

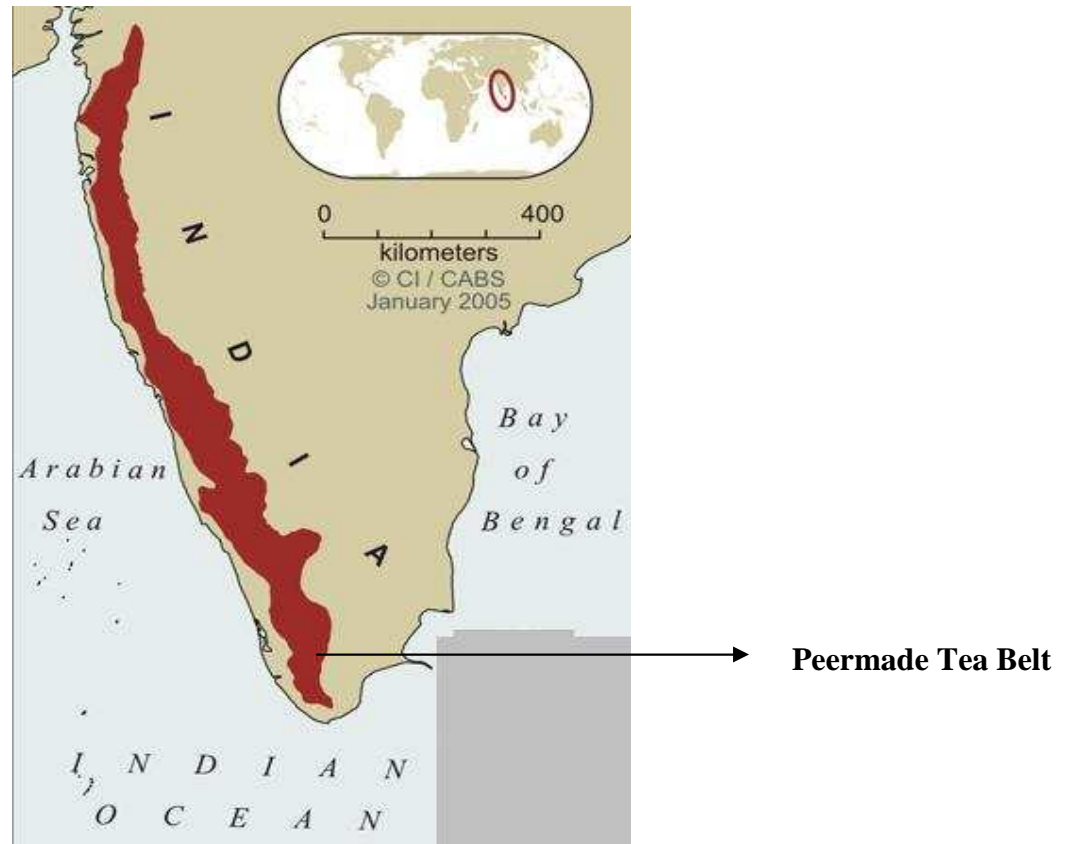
Nodal towns and the surrounding tea estates: a bird’s eye view

Peermade tea belt comprises 36 tea estates loosely located around the hilly town of Peermade with more than 10,000 hectares of tea fields in total. In terms of Physical geography, Peermade is located on the southern part of Western Ghats,²⁶ which is also home to almost all the tea plantation districts in South India. It includes Nilgiri plantations in Tamil Nadu; Plantations near Wayanad and Nelliampathy in Malabar region and plantations surrounding Ponmudi Mountains in the most southern part of Western Ghats; and Kannan Devan

²⁵ A discussion of Kerala development model in relation to plantation workers is provided in the second chapter.

²⁶ Western Ghats are series of mountain ranges located in the western part of India. It is also called Sahyadri (means *the benevolent*) mountains. The range starts near the border of states of Gujarat and Maharashtra, south of the River Tapti, and runs approximately 1600 km through the states of Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Kerala ending at Kanyakumari, at the southern tip of India.

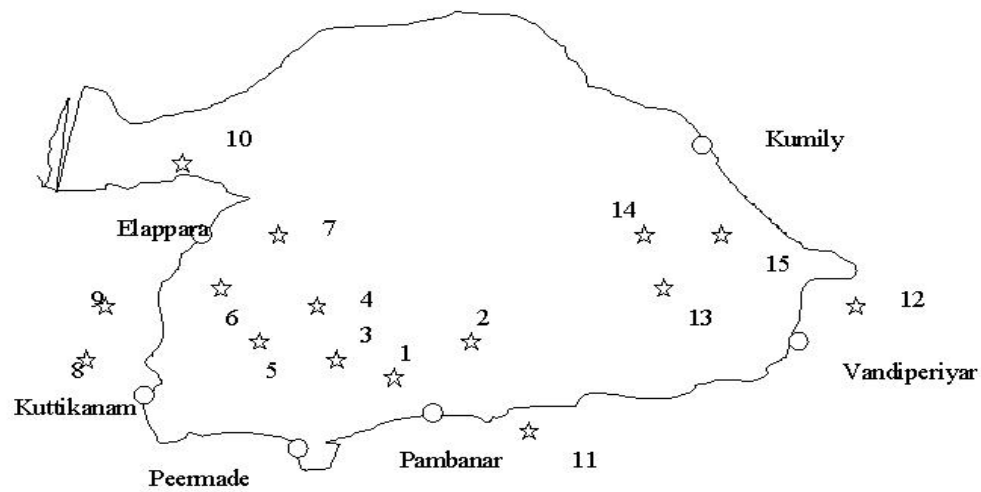
plantations located around the hilly town of Munnar which is only around 150 km away from Peermade tea belt. A location map of Western Ghats is provided here (Map 2):



(Map 3.2: Western Ghats of India (marked in red) where most of the tea belts in south India are located)

Although, Peermade is considered to be a rough centre of the 36 tea estates which are extended to all sides of Peermade, there are three sub-urban towns namely *Elappara*, *Pambanar* and *Vandiperiyar* around which the life of plantation workers in the Peermade tea belt is situated. I call these towns as nodal towns since they are located in the centre of tea estates, and the workers use these nodal towns as outside market and also as exit to the outside world for the plantation workers. These three nodal towns run in the middle of the plantation belt and almost form a circle within the plantation belt (see the map 3). They are located with a considerable distance between each other with *Elappara* in the north western end (which is 10 km away from Peermade) and *Vandiperiyar* in the south eastern end (Which is 16 km away from Pambanar), having *Peermade* and *Pambanar* in the middle with a distance of 4 km in between. It takes around an hour to travel by bus from Elappara to

Vandiperiyar whose distance is 29 km. A rough sketch of the nodal towns and their adhering estates are as follows:²⁷



Peermade Tea Belt

Tea Estates marked in the Map

- | | |
|----------------|-----------------|
| 1. Pambanar | 9. Stackbrook |
| 2. Ranikovil | 10. Bon-Ami |
| 3. Ladrum | 11. Pattumalai |
| 4. Koduakarnam | 12. Thankamalai |
| 5. Glenmary | 13. Pasumalai |
| 6. Woodlands | 14. Nellimalai |
| 7. Kozhikanam | 15. Wallardie |
| 8. Ashly | |

(Map 3:3. Peermade Tea Belt)

The tea estate workers adhering to different nodal towns are from different places in Tamil Nadu. Most of the workers in estates surrounding *Elappara* town came from *Kanyakumari/Thirunelveli* region in the southern Tamil Nadu. In contrast, most of the workers surrounding *Vandiperiyar* town came from *Trichy/Madurai* region, which is situated in the north of *Thirunelveli* region. While tea estates around *Vandiperiyar* and *Elappara* towns represent clearly this difference, the tea estate surrounding *Pambanar* town presents a blend of the differences represented by other two towns. The cultural elements of the plantation workers - such as local slangs, food preparation and the methods of rites of passages - slightly vary across the tea estates given to cultural disparity in terms of their social

²⁷ Please note that not all estates are listed here. I have listed only the estates I have visited (15 estates out of 32) during my fieldwork since this is a demonstration of the relation between the nodal towns and the tea estates.

origin (that is the differences owed to different cultural areas in present day Tamil Nadu where their ancestors came from) and due to variations in appropriating Kerala's Malayali culture.

It is a locally accepted knowledge that the plantation workers in the tea plantations around *Elappara* town are more exposed to mainstream Keralite or Malayalee (the dominant language) society compared to those around *Vandiperiyar* town. This is probably due to the fact that the *Kanyakumari* region had close association with Travancore princely state (which forms the southern and central part of modern Kerala) from where the estate workers near Elappara town came, in contrary to the latter who came from Madurai region, the heartland of Tamil nationalism. It could be also because the workers around *Vandiperiyar* town are able to keep in touch with Tamil Nadu more frequently and more effectively, and thus to retain their Tamil culture since Madurai region is much closer to *Vandiperiyar* township. The distance between Madurai and Vandiperiyar is only 118 km; conversely, the distance between Kanyakumari and Vandiperiyar is around 220 km and thus the place of social origin/native place for workers around Elappara town is considerably far away and so they are not able to retain their Tamil values as effectively as the tea estate workers around *Vandiperiyar* town.

As mentioned above, *Elappara* nodal town forms the north western end point with few estates adhering to this nodal town. It is the oldest nodal town in the Peermade tea belt as the region surrounding *Elappara* is the earliest coffee and later, tea planted region in the Peermade tea belt. In terms of size, *Elappara* town, with a population around 4,000 is smaller than Vandiperiyar and bigger than *Pambanar*. Few estates that adhere to this nodal town include Ashly estate, Stack brook estate, Fair Field estate, Kozhikanam estate, Bonami (Bon-Ami) estate, Woodlands estate, Kottamalai estate, Cheenthalar estate and Chinnar estate. *Elappara* act as a local market and an exit to the outside world for the plantation workers adhering to it as a nodal town. The ethnic composition of the Elappara town is a mixture of migrant Syrian Christians and backward castes of Ezhava and Nadars.²⁸ There are around seven shops owned by other communities such as Nairs, Muslims and Dalits. Due to the predominance of

²⁸ The Syrian Christian migrants came to the Peermade tea belt from Kerala's Christian dominated regions of Kottayam and Pala in the first half of the 20th century. Most of them were the lower class of Syrian Christians seeking a better livelihood. Ezhavas and Nadars (also known as Thiyas and Shanars respectively) are south Indian backward caste groups traditionally associated with toddy-tapping. They are ranked below shudras in the traditional Hindu caste hierarchy. They mostly came from southern Travancore, particularly from the plains region of Aleppy and Kanyakumari regions respectively.

Malayalam speaking people in the town, the town appears more as an ordinary high range town of Kerala than a typical Tamil dominated town as Vandiperiyar.

Vandiperiyar town is situated in the eastern part of the tea belt, and, Pasumalai estate, Thankamalai estate, Mount Estate, Arnakkal estate, and Manjumalai estate are few tea estates that adhere to this town. In contrary to Elappara and Vandiperiyar, Pambanar town is a mix of almost equal number of Tamils and Malayalam speaking population. The Tamil speaking high caste Hindus and Muslims control equal number of shops/businesses as Malayalam speaking Hindus (mostly Ezhavas) and Syrian Christians. Ladrums estate, Pambanar estate, Koduakarnam Estate, and Lekshmi Kovil estate are few tea estates that encircle this nodal town.

Nodal towns and the plantation workers: understanding the symbiotic relation

The social life in the immediate outskirts of the tea estates should be understood as an elaboration of the plantation as a system and institution, similar to the point made by Edgar T Thomson in a different context (Thomson 1975, p xxiii). In view of that, the social life in the immediate outskirt, that is the nodal towns here, needs further elaboration, in terms of their relation to plantations.

First of all, these nodal towns are products of the plantation development in the region and very much reflect the character as an auxiliary to the plantation life; i.e. the periphery (towns) act as a market place and a gateway for the plantation workers to the outside world. Plantations are characterised by their insulated space and a total like institution that distinguishes the plantation life from the life in its periphery. In contrary, the life in the periphery represents another world, that of an ordinary village or a semi urban township that is marked by small land holdings, heterogeneous occupations and in part, has organically evolved socioeconomic institutions which are missing in the plantation system. Besides, it is the life in its periphery that familiarise the plantation workers to an alternative life situation or what is meant to be 'ordinary' life in the larger outside society today. In other words, it is the periphery of the plantations that shows that the plantation life is what really peripheral to the larger social life.

The tea estates are isolated from these nodal towns by having the workers' settlements in the very middle of the plantation or even beyond the centre towards the remote side of the plantation that further increases the distance between nodal towns and the workers' settlements. For instance, while *Pasumalai* and *Thangamalai* estates are located four miles and three miles respectively away from the nodal town of Vandiperiyar in different directions, *Kooliekanam* estate and *Ashly* estate are located two miles and five miles respectively away from the nodal town of *Elappara*. And, *Koduvakarnam* estate is located around 5 miles away from *Pambanar*, its nodal town. Although these distances between nodal towns and tea estates does not seem to be very far, extremely poor road and transportation system between the nodal towns and the tea estates significantly decrease the accessibility of the tea estates to their nodal town. The major mode of transportation is a low cost Jeep which shuttle between the estates and the nodal towns. During my fieldwork, I have found it very difficult to travel in between estates not only because of the distance, but also because I had to wait for minimum around an hour for all seats in the shuttle jeep get filled. This was particularly the case when I was travelling to Pasumalai estate.

As mentioned above, nodal towns act as market centre for the plantation workers. Since Sunday is an unpaid holiday, usually workers go to their nodal towns on Sundays to buy groceries and other necessary goods for the following week. So the nodal towns remain very busy on Sundays as it is *Chanthai Dhivasam* which colloquially means the Day of Shopping. This is very unique to the Peermade tea belt (and other plantation areas at least in India I suppose) since other towns in Kerala (and also mostly the case of western towns) normally remain closed on Sundays because non-plantation people's market is within their space of everyday interaction. Accordingly, Sunday is the day of interaction between the plantation world and the immediate outside society. As more people visit the nodal towns on Sundays, usually there will be more number of shuttling by the Jeeps between the town and the tea estates. A major attraction of Sunday Market in all the nodal towns is the roadside (temporary) shops run by Tamil merchants who every Sunday comes from *Cumbum* and *Koodaloor* (Tamil Nadu towns that border with Kerala) in the market. They mostly sell vegetables, Spices and clothes at cheaper rates than the established (permanent) shops. In fact, every Sunday these nodal towns looks like a festival day with people from different plantations coming together with nice local outfits who may possibly take a *Chaya/vadai* (tea/snacks) or *Chaappaadu* (meal) in the town.

Climate in the Peermade tea belt

The climate in Peermade, no wonder, is conducive to the plantation crops, especially for tea, coffee, cardamom and pepper. Although, tea is the major cultivated crop in the region and is produced in the plantation system, there are other cash crops mentioned above that are also grown on a small scale basis within the tea plantation and also by small land owners in the belt who are predominantly belong to Syrian Christian community. The climate is widely influenced by its altitude and its proximity to the Arabian Sea. It is located slightly 2000 meters above sea level and remains cold and humid throughout the year. The annual rainfall varies from 250- 400 cm, just as other parts of Kerala, but is reasonably high compared to many other parts of India. Being located in the Western Ghats, South-west monsoon is the major source of rain in the tea belt, which begins by the end of May or by the beginning of June and lasts till mid-September. The annual average temperature is around 15° C – 20° C, which is much lower than fertile plains of Kerala which ranges between 28°-32°C.

As part of the tropical region, it has wet and dry seasons rather than the four season divisions (spring, summer, autumn and winter) as in other parts of the world. The tea belt is blessed with high bio-diversity, reasonable forest cover and grass land which makes the habitat for wild species in the Periyar Wildlife Sanctuary. Moreover, the closeness of Kerala to the sea creates a moderate climate throughout the year. But comparatively, the high range such as Peermade is much colder than other places in Kerala. Also, it is the Western Ghats, to which the Peermade high range is part of, that blocks the dry wind coming from the north and thus saves Kerala from becoming a dry region. While frequent rain with considerable dry spell is the ideal weather required for tea production in the region, the one season rain fall hinder the tea production. The tea production is at its highest level in the belt, by the beginning of the monsoon (May-June) and by the end of the monsoon (August-September).

CHAPTER FOUR

PLANTATION LIFE: STRUCTURE, SOCIETY AND POLITICS

Plantation as a total institution

In the initial years of plantation development, Travancore state refused to grant land for cultivation in the immediate environs of the plantations. This ensured the total isolation of the plantation from the rest of the world (Erik Baak 1997, p 121). This spatial alienation from the mainstream society seems to provide an insulated space for creation of an enclave within the Indian/Kerala state which could be termed as a State within the State (Erik Baak 1997; Raviraman 2002) where the estate owners/management assumes the responsibilities of state such as law and order, and social welfare for the workers. Furthermore, the foregoing alienation coupled with clear cut division of authority and responsibility distinguished in terms of origin, social background and life style (Erik Baak 1997, P 119) contributed to the plantation society assuming the form of a total institution (Goffman 1961),²⁹ where everyday life is largely conditioned by the plantation system of production. This enclaving of plantation society also possibly facilitated the shaping of a habitus (in Bourdieu's use) that sustained the reproduction of certain rigidity and relatively unchanging character of the hierarchical and stratified order of plantation society.

In this total institution like system, workers are hindered from a capacity to move out from the insulated space and are secluded from changes overtaking socio-economic circumstances in outside realities. The only connection to the outside world from the plantation is the nodal towns. But as mentioned in the last chapter, the poor condition of the roads that connect the estates with the nodal towns and the poor transportation place restriction on the movement of the plantation workers to the nodal towns. Furthermore, the insularity of the plantations was not a simple effect of the nature of the plantation economy. The insularity was promoted by

²⁹ In his seminal work *Asylums*, sociologist Erving Goffman defines a total institution as a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life. Plantation could be considered as a total like institution given to its spatial isolation and, insulated and rigid internal structure. In such an environment, workers are hindered from a capacity to move out and are secluded from changes overtaking socio-economic circumstances in outside realities. This helplessness costs them when they are unconditionally exposed to the economic crisis which is discussed in chapter 4.

an outside cultural imagination of caste that defined the plantation workers as low in religious hierarchical terms. This spatial insulation and cultural alienation placed restrictions on the development of a powerful social and political consciousness among plantation workers to change their situation, unlike for other sectors of the Kerala population. Thus the opportunities that are open to other communities and groups in Kerala, often mediated by state intervention, are far more restricted for the plantation populations. The socio-geographical isolation of the workers in the Peermade belt operates to discourage or reduce the likelihood of organized political action or resistance in the plantations. But this does not mean that the plantation system is completely unaffected by outside realities.³⁰ It means that the insulated space and the rigid production relations obstruct rather than prevent the outside realities and thus operates to produce a relatively closed-off system with few alternatives to imagine beyond the closed system.

However, what is more important is the critical role of this insulated space in perpetuating the plantation social system in close relation to the production system in the plantation. As argued by Genovese (1964), plantation society in general is confined within itself and the social order of plantation life is conditioned by the all-encompassing system of plantation production that entered into all aspects of life, even those not directly connected to the production processes. For instance, in the Peermade tea belt, caste relations were defined in terms of the plantation productive system. This was compounded by the fact that the colonial rulers and entrepreneurs who devised the indentured labour system conceived the traditional caste order in class/stratificational terms (Dirks 2001) and not in terms of the ritual-status hierarchy whereby traditional caste relations were defined (Dumont 1980).

The occupational hierarchy and the labour order

Plantations owned by different companies are divided into several tea estates for effective supervision and administration of the production process. The occupational structures of these estates are similar throughout the Peermade tea belt as observed in the five estates where I carried out my fieldwork. Tea Plantations in the belt is marked by its strict hierarchical order with the owner at the top and worker at the bottom with manager, superintendants, field officers, factory manager, supervisors, office clerks and technical (skilled) workers in the middle. Given below is the chart of the plantation labour order:

³⁰ This is demonstrated in the case of Cuban plantations where after the 1959 revolution the ownership of plantations changed from the private to the state, which had impacts within the plantation system (Bhowmik 1980).

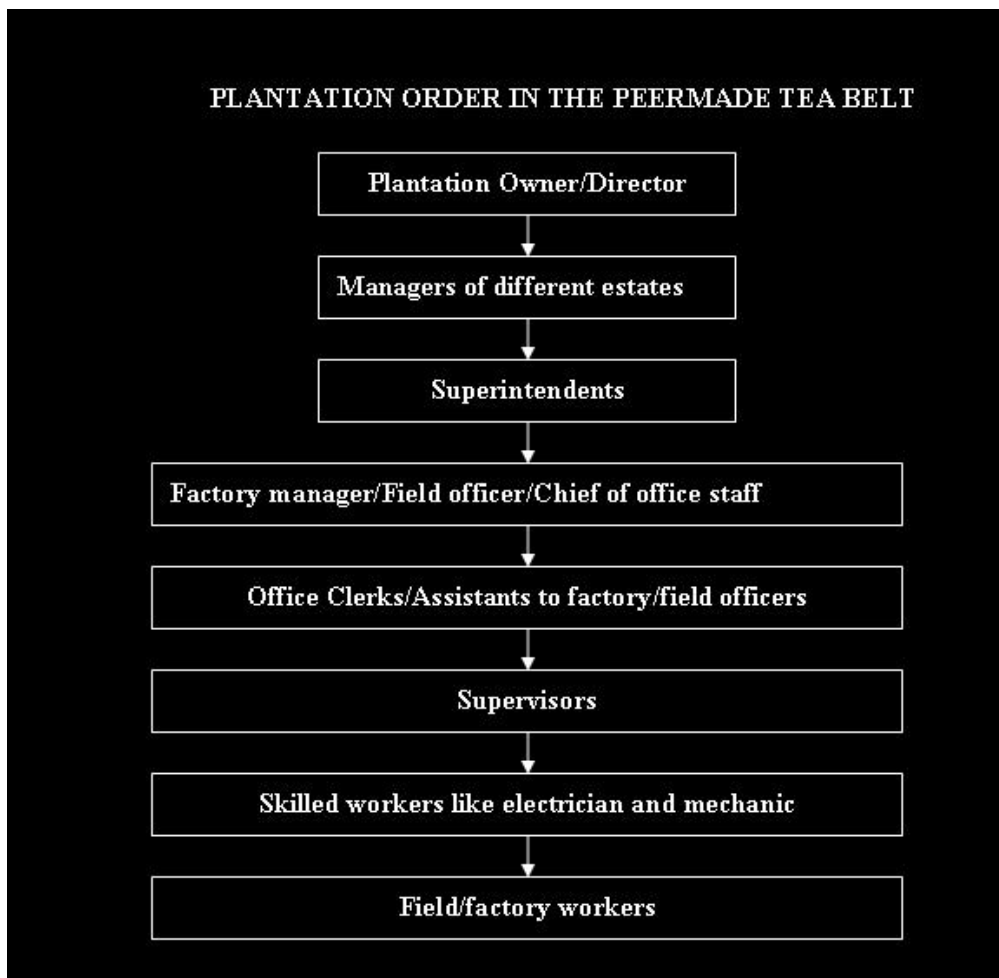


Chart 4.1: Plantation order in the Peermade Tea Belt

The owner of the plantation is usually acting as the director³¹ of the plantations. The director is followed by managers of different estates (the divided units of the plantation). Although the director is the apex authority in the plantation order, it is the manager of the estates who holds the real authority since he is the one who lives in the estates and directly administers the daily production processes. He is assisted by normally two superintendents, each of whom have responsibilities for the production process in the field and the factory respectively. The superintendants are usually young ‘management/agriculture’ graduates appointed for training and for gaining work experience in the plantation. In addition to assisting the manager, their function also includes mediating the relation between the field/factory officers and the manager. They also take over the managerial responsibilities when the manager takes a leave or goes on business tour. In fact, the staff below the plantation director and the manager are

³¹ The director is sometimes also referred to as the Group manager, referring to the group of estates.

divided separately on the basis of their position/role at the factory and within the field, the two domains of plantation production. This excludes office staff who take care of the paper works related to both factory and tea field.

The superintendents are followed by the factory manager³² and field officer who are directly responsible for the production process in the factory and the tea field respectively. Their primary duty is to provide guidance to the supervisors, assign the daily tasks for the workers and maintain the attendance register for calculating wages. They also distribute wages and weekly *chelavu kasu* (an advance amount for daily maintenance mentioned in the first chapter). They are more-or-less in the same rank as the executive officers of the factory and the field respectively. However, the role of the field officer in the entire production process is larger than the factory manager's one since the field officer, in addition to his duties in the field, also acts as the representative of the manager to deal with workers' grievances and any dispute among workers within or outside the workplace that hinder the plantation order. In this sense, he could be called the administrative officer of plantation workers. The field officer also supervises the maintenance in the plantation infrastructure which comprises the maintenance of buildings and electric/water supply in the estate.

Below them in the labour order are office clerks, who are followed by supervisors in the field and factory.³³ Supervisor, as the title implicates, engages in full time supervision of the production process in the factories and the tea fields. They, unlike field officers and superintendents, have to be physically present always in the workplace to monitor the workers. They are also responsible for ensuring the workers' attendance in the workplace and following the schedule of the work. In addition, they assist the field officer in preparing the wage list and in maintaining the attendance register. There are more field supervisors than factory supervisors considering the large supervision that the tea field demands. The supervisors are followed by the technical or skilled workers including mechanics in the factory, drivers, plumber, carpenter, post man and electrician. Since these are skilled workforce, they are treated almost equally to supervisors.

³² The factory manager was called Tea-maker during colonial times. This reference is still used in casual talks.

³³ Office clerks are considered superior to the supervisors because of the higher educational qualification required for the clerical post³³ and also because they are recruited directly for the post unlike supervisors who have usually been promoted out of skilled worker grades (such as watcher or assistant to the field officer) and sometimes even from manual workers. Furthermore, there are many cases where the children of office clerks managed to get into the same position and the case is similar when it comes to supervisors. So the aspect of such inheritance also differentiates the status of office clerks and supervisors.

The lowest category in the plantation structure is none other than the manual workers, who form the largest group in the plantation class structure. Within the unskilled wage labourers, there are further categories. One important categorisation is the division of labour based on gender. Men are employed in physically demanding work in the field and the factory. Women are engaged in plucking tea leaves and less physically demanding work in the factory. They work more hours than men as men are often excused for one or two hours if the assigned work demands arduous physical effort. Another categorisation is based on workers in the field and the factory. Although workers could interchange the work place, in most cases, they remain as either field or factory workers for the whole period of their work in the plantation. The third categorisation is based on the labour status of the worker, dividing the workers into either permanent workers called *Varushathaal* (literally mean workers who are guaranteed work throughout year) or temporary workers called *vaarthal* (means workers who are provided work for the week). These categories are cross-penetrating ones, as there are both male and female included in both the temporary and permanent workforces.

The permanent workers are guaranteed work throughout the year and they are entitled for different welfare benefits. The temporary workers are seasonal workers (or reserve workforce) who are not guaranteed work throughout the year. But they live within the estate although they get work only during peak season of tea plucking. Most of the welfare benefits are provided only to permanent workers and only few facilities like that of common water supply are given to the temporary workers. The temporary workers are not provided with housing tenements. But they could still live within the plantation as they are allowed to build small huts next to the permanent workers' settlement (*layam*). Part of the temporary workforce are children of the permanent workers, and most of them continue to stay with their parents in the *layam*. But there are many of these children who opt to live in a separate hut after their marriage. Sometimes, their parents or relatives allow them to live in the veranda of the tenement, where they have to sleep and cook. This temporary workforce comprises around 40% of the total workforce in the plantation. The picture below shows a self built hut of a temporary worker's family:



Picture 4.1: Self constructed house of a temporary worker

The routine of work and the maintenance of the plantation order

The institutionalising process of workforce and the maintenance of the plantation order are carried out through day-to-day practices inherent in the production process in factory, the field and also in social domains. The most important in this regard is the daily schedule in the plantation. The work is organized on the basis of a 48-hour per week (eight hours a day) of six working days. Sunday is an unpaid holiday. The morning muster for the male workers is at 6.30 am, when workers must assemble in front of the muster office to have their attendance registered and their daily tasks assigned. Following the muster, the workers go back to their estate lines and report at the assigned place of work at 8 am. The work varies from weeding/spraying fertilizers to the pruning of the tea bushes. They also engage in transporting plucked tea leaves from the field to the factory and loading them into the large wooden drums in the factory for further processing. After four hours of work, they get a lunch break of one hour and go back to work again from 1 pm to 5 pm. If the work is extraordinarily physically-demanding on the day it often occurs, then the working day is shortened by two hours or so before the scheduled time. The decision in this regard is taken by the field officer in consultation with the superintendents. The work sessions both in the factory and field are directly monitored by supervisors and occasionally visited by field officer and factory manager. Furthermore, this routine of work is applicable to all the plantations in the Peermade

tea belt as they operate on the basis of common rules and acts related to labour rights, industrial disputes and trade unions.



Picture 4.2: Workers loading tea leaves

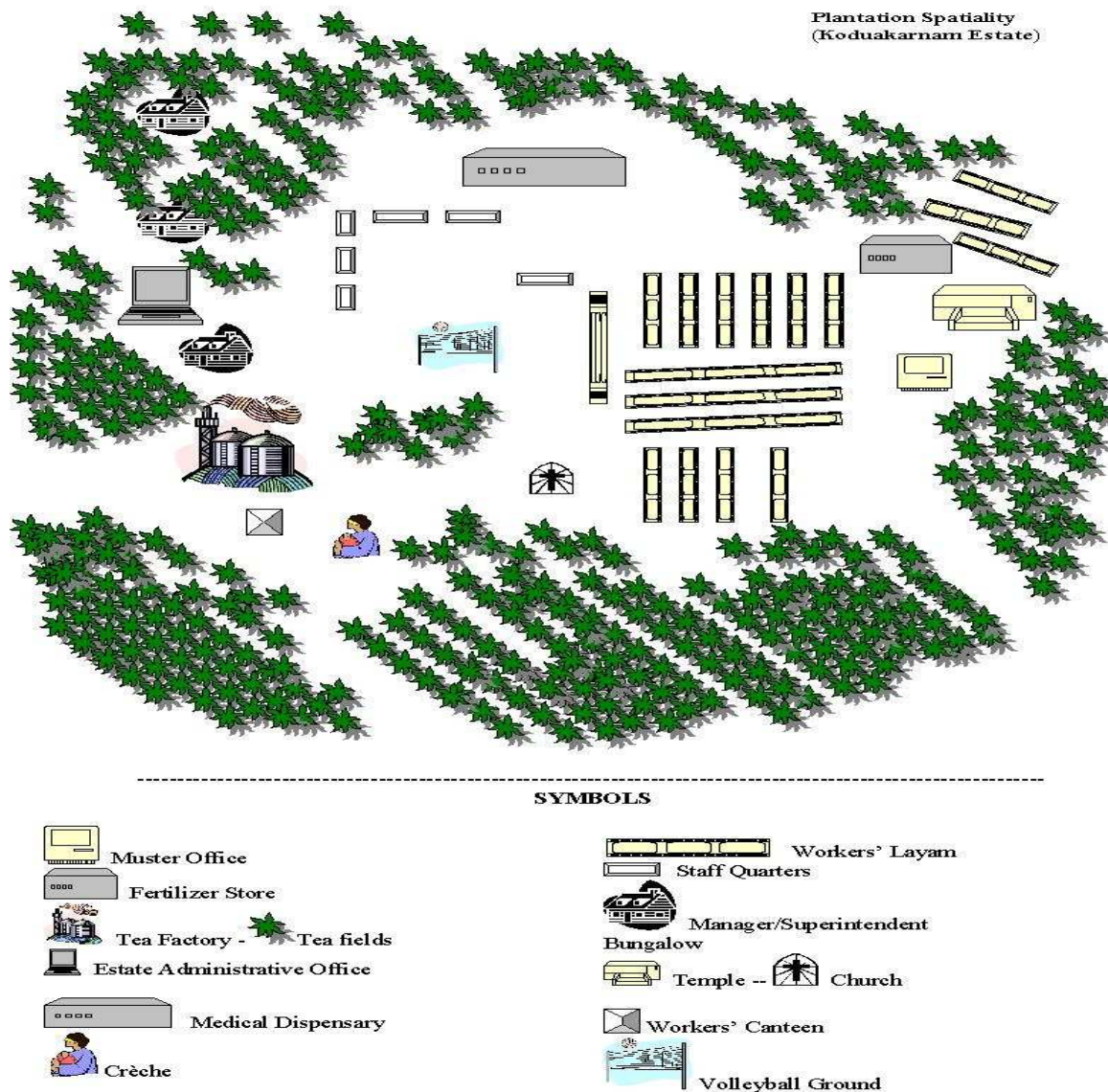
The female workers are engaged in tea plucking. They have to report their arrival in the tea field at 8 am and work till 5 pm, with a one hour lunch break. They pluck tea leaves in bamboo baskets which is carried with the help of rope lashed on the head. They fold the sari to the knees and wrap hard plastic sheets around their waist and thighs so as not to be injured by working among the thick tea bushes. They have to pluck at least 16 kg of tea leaves to become eligible for the full daily wage which is Indian Rupees (Rs.) 96. 20% of their wage will be reduced if they pluck less than 16 kg. What is more unfortunate is that when weighing the tea leaves plucked by each worker at the end of the working day, the supervisors and field officers usually tamper the quantity in the weighing machine and register the weight lower than the real quantity of the leaves plucked. One supervisor told me that it is the weight of the bag that carries the tea leaves that is reduced. But this is not convincing as the bag is a light one which weighs not more than 1.5 kg and the supervisors reduce at least 4 kg when weighing. So this is just a lame excuse to exploit the workers' labour.

Factory work is divided into shifts and is mostly done by male workers. There are two shifts daily, a day and a night shift. The day shift is from 7am to 5pm and the night shift is from 8 pm to 6 am. In season time, there will be three shifts in the factory. The workers are paid according to an eight hour working shift with additional money of Rs.20 per hour for overtime. The work in the factory is more hazardous than the field due to the dust of the

crushed tea leaves. The inhaled dust causes lung disease and can result in other internal damage. No mask is provided in the factories and the workers, although aware of the issue, could not manage to resist the lack of decent working atmosphere in the factory. For this reason, workers always prefer to work in the field rather than in the factory.

Spatiality and the reproduction of the plantation order

This section is to delineate the spatial allocation of different categories in the production system that reinforces the rigidity and order in the plantation production system.³⁴ As Harvey (1982) argues, the built environment is a general precondition for and shapes the forces of production. Below is the map of spatiality in Koduakarnam estate (Map 4.1):



³⁴ The relation between capitalist modes of production and associated space is a well explored phenomenon in social science. See Henri Lefebvre (1991), David Harvey (1982) and Edward Soja (1989) in this regard.

The lay-out in the tea estates is very similar throughout the Peermade tea belt, but with minor variations due to the local landscape. The space within the estate that joins with the main road from the nearest nodal town is considered as the entrance of the estate. However, the entrance does not mean the border, because the border is where the tea fields of the particular estate ends, and where it meets the tea fields of another estate or any other private land. The entrance here means the way into the settlements located within the tea fields in the plantations. The Temple/Church, small tea stalls, crèches for the workers' children and the Muster office where the workers assemble in the morning for work assignments, are usually located near the entrance into the plantation.³⁵

The entrance is also a starting point for the workers' lines (living accommodation), that run deeper towards the inner spaces. Tea factory, medical dispensary, fertilizer stores and the staff quarters are located in various directions from the lines with no more than 200 metres away from the lines. In few estates, a canteen for the factory workers and labour club is also located in the vicinity of the factory. Tea fields are located around this settlement space, and run for acres of land.³⁶ The manager's bungalow is located considerably away from the factory and workers' settlements, and the superintendents/assistant managers' bungalows are located on the way to the managers' bungalow. These bungalows are fenced from the surrounding tea fields and workers and other staff need to obtain prior permission to enter into the vicinity of these bungalows. This invisibility and fencing of managerial staff bungalows regulate the accessibility of workers to the manager and reinforce the condition of distance and distinctiveness of the manager and other higher level staff.

³⁵ In most cases, the road passes through many estates, as the estate may have been located behind another estate. So the estate that is located close to the nodal town has the comparative advantage of being exposed to the outside world than the one located in the very interior of the plantation belt. This is evident from the fact that those who belong to Pambanar and Melazhuthai estates took the advantage of their nearness to the Pambanar nodal town as they easily managed to occupy manual works such as head loading and construction in the nodal town and other nearby towns than those who live in the remote estates.

³⁶ There are also cardamom fields which act as a small supplementary to the tea production in the belt.



Picture 4.3: Workers Settlement and the Temple (the yellow coloured construction)

There are small plots left in front of the workers' lines in which the workers grow a variety of fruits and vegetables such as green chilly, curry leaves, spinach, mango, jack fruit and guava fruit for domestic consumption. These spaces, when not being fenced by the workers to grow these crops, are used as public domains where the small social gatherings are organised by the workers. That is also where the youth in the plantations come together to sit and chat. Moreover, the use of space reflects the stratified and gendered social arrangements (i.e. occupational hierarchy and gender division) within the plantation system. Men congregate in the open spaces usually near the volleyball ground, muster office, factory, temple/church and estate canteen. Women usually do not come to a public space just to sit together and chat. However, in addition to the tea fields during their work, they usually gather around the public water pipes/well/ablutions areas, and occasionally they come together and chat during their religious prayer and self group meetings. There are labour clubs for these informal gatherings, but those in most estates, are used by staff rather than workers.

The managerial staff have separate gathering places such as badminton courts and guest houses which are located close to the estate office and manager bungalows. These spaces, usually fenced and exclusively meant for staff, are well maintained by the workers appointed for these purposes. In contrary to the private space allocated for the staff, the spaces meant for

the workers, such as the plots around lines and volleyball grounds, are not fenced nor maintained properly. In addition, unlike the spaces meant for staff, workers' spaces do not have any entry restrictions and thus are a public one. This public-private distinction set-up in the spatiality or built environment in the plantation re-inculcates the idea of respective positions of different categories of people in the hierarchical production process. This idea is discussed in detail in the section below on social prestige.

Symbolic power,³⁷ prestige and the plantation order

The top managerial staff have considerable prestige and symbolic power since they are in a position of absolute domination and they command the destinies of those below them in the insulated system of the plantations. In this insulated social world, they are virtually lords of all that they survey and thus they are treated almost like nobility. The senior manager is called *Periya Durai*, which in Tamil means the 'The Master Chief', and the assistant manager is called *Chinna Durai* which means 'Little Chief'. The field officer is called *Periya-ayya*, which means 'The Big Master', and the assistant field officer is called *Kolunthayya*, which colloquially means 'the field master'. Even the office superintendent is highly admired as he is called *Periyabisayya*, which means, the honourable master of the Office. All other office clerks and factory staff are simply called *Ayya*, a Tamil word that literally means Master/Sir and is used to show high admiration and to reveal subordination.

What is more interesting is that the wives of all these staff are called *Amma*, that literally means mother, which in this context is a feminine ascription for veneration and a humble expression of subordination. Even the children of these staff are admired and highly respected. This relation goes beyond the estate boundaries. I draw a relevant example from my fieldwork experience here. When I was waiting in the *Vandiperiyar* town for the shuttle jeep to Pasumalai estate where I was doing part of my fieldwork, the wife of the assistant field officer of Pasumalai estate had passed by the bus stop. She is a Syrian Christian and works as teacher in a private English Medium school. A male worker from *Pasumalai* estate, who was standing next to me, politely greeted her as she passed us. After she passed us with a

³⁷ I use the term symbolic power similarly to Bourdieu's use of the term. For Bourdieu, symbolic power is the power that emanates from the sources of symbolic capital such as prestige and honour that legitimate the hierarchical relations in a society (Bourdieu 1977, p 165). In other words, Symbolic power is the power to consecrate, that is, the power to produce sacred (hierarchical) social divides and makes the divide worth of being recognised (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, p 210n.172). By keeping Bourdieu's insights in mind, I tried to explore the practice of symbolic capital and how it facilitates the reproduction of plantation order in the tea estates under study.

benevolent look at the worker as an acceptance of the greeting, the worker was telling his friend, who seemed to be from another estate, that the lady is very friendly to the workers unlike other *Amma* (wives of managerial staff) in the estate. This further reveals the highly paternalistic nature of the system which is a kind of marked continuity with the colonial past (See Lovett 1972; Macfarlane & Macfarlane 2003).

The manager and assistant managers are seldom seen by the workers. They rarely talk to workers and are aloof. It is the field officer, supervisors and factory manager who mediates the relationship between workers and the manager. They not only work with the workers in the workplace, but they also maintain their relationships with the workers outside the workplace through their participation in marriage ceremonies and funeral rituals that occur in workers' families. In addition, the relationship between field officer/factory manager and workers are often mediated by the supervisors who live in the workers' line, but with certain additional facilities such as private connection to water supply. So the stratificational relation is more graded in the social domain and equally informal as formal, but without any alteration in the hierarchy. Thus, as a voucher to the observation of Goffman in *Asylums* (1961) that this informal relationship is what mediates the formal relationship in a total institution, it is the informal relationship initiated by field officers and supervisors with the workers that helps the plantation system to sustain. Moreover, such relationships serves the ritual function of ensuring that both classes know their functions and social roles which means institutionalising them (Goffman 1961) within the perfect hegemonic system of plantation with plantation management having absolute control over the system.

Furthermore, the plantation order is ensured through the structuring of the domestic spaces and the access to day-to-day necessities like water supply, which constantly put a strong barrier between managerial staff and workers. Managerial staff are provided with well-furnished and fenced houses with private connections to water supply. The residence provided for the manager of the plantation is usually a magnificent bungalow with beautifully landscaped garden that reflects a colonial feel. In fact, almost all of them were built during the colonial times and represent western architectural and artistic sense. There are at least two to three servants in the Bungalow (selected from the field/factory workers) which seems to symbolise high nobility and authority of the manager in the plantation. Superintendents, who are second only to the manager in the plantation hierarchy, also have similar bungalows with comparatively fewer servants, amenities, and modifications. Clerks and other managerial staff

live in what they call as estate quarters which are compounded individual houses with private water supply and servants on certain occasions.

This is in contrast to the case of workers whose domestic space and access to water is shared and thus is a public one. As mentioned before, they live in barracks called *layam* which means lines.³⁸ These lines are divided into tenements that usually have a little kitchen space, a single room with a dimension of '10x12' feet where they sleep and an open veranda. In average, there are more than five members in a family who live in that single room. While the bungalows and staff quarters are made of cement and polished wood and stone, workers' lines are made of mud and stone although new ones are with cement. The lines are built as a more open space where the workers may not feel the privacy of a domestic space. As the privatized connection of water is available only to the managerial staff of the plantation, the workers have to fetch water either through a common pipeline or from a common well.



Picture 4.4: Workers' lines (side view)

Most of the facilities given to the staff mean much more than just welfare for those staff. They, in fact, mean a symbolic expression of superiority over the workers, and thus assist the reproduction of hierarchy in the plantation. Moreover, as mentioned above, the houses of managerial staff are located considerably away from the workers' lines and thus the managerial houses are made invisible to the workers, and reinforce the difference between classes. This creation of a spatial barrier between technical staff and workers coupled with the

³⁸ Whose meaning itself signifies the workers' houses being arranged in open rows.

inculcated notion that workers do not (have the right to) own a private space or private access to common resources reinforce the existing modalities of the plantation order.



Picture 4.5: Manager's Bungalow in an estate in the belt (source: Chinnar estate advertisement)

Furthermore, any cultural celebration in the plantation is inaugurated by the members of the plantation management. The invitation to inaugurate particular events is closely associated with the plantation hierarchy. For instance, inauguration of small events like the cricket tournament for children is done by supervisors/field officers/clerks in the plantation. But the bigger ones such as temple festivals and inter-estate volleyball tournament for the workers are inaugurated by the manager of the plantation. Moreover, the social power/status of the plantation management is reproduced through them being the 'leisure class' (Veblen 1899/2007) in the plantation. They retain the colonial values that their British counterparts left, which include late-night parties and elite (colonial) games like badminton. In addition to this, when cultural events are organised in the plantation, the manager of the estate is the one who contributes the highest amount of money in meeting the expenses of the events. This symbolic exhibition of wealth and conspicuous consumption retains the plantation hierarchy as argued by Mauss that 'material loss is a social gain' (Mauss 2002; quoted in Martinez 2007).

Trade unions and the plantation politics

Trade unions are the markers of politics in the plantation. It is the trade unions, instead of political parties, that label the workers' association with the electoral politics in Kerala. No wonder, most of the issues that are raised in the local electoral agenda are related to the plantation workers. This was evident in the last State election in 2006 as well, when the claim over successful welfare policies and the rescue of workers from the crisis was made by the ruling (liberal) United Democratic Front (UDF) and the accusations of corruption in these welfare policies by the major opponent, Left Democratic Front (LDF), became the key issue in their election manifesto/propaganda (The Hindu dated Apr 21, 2006).

The following four major trade union movements are active in the plantations:

1. Peermade Thottam Thozhilali Union (PTTU) affiliated to the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) which is politically attached to the Communist Party of India (Marxist).
2. High range Estates Labour Union (HELU) affiliated to the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) which is politically attached to the Communist Party of India.
3. High range Plantation Employees Union (HRPEU) affiliated to the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) which is politically attached to the Indian National Congress.
4. Bhartiya Plantation Mazdoor Mahasangh (BPMM), affiliated to the Bhartiya Mazdoor Sangh, which is politically attached to Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP)

All trade unions except BPMM have almost equal numbers of members. BPMM is in the early stages of its establishment (founded in 1984). So it does not have significant popularity among the plantation workers. However, Thangamalai estate near the Vandiperiyar town and Ladrums estate near the Pambanar town are considered as the stronghold of BPMM. In fact, the BPMM, being part of Hindu nationalist ideology, are now in the process of attracting the Hindu workers into their trade union particularly through a process of sanscritisation through their cultural wing organisations. They are also successful to a certain extent in this regard primarily because the anti-Hindu sentiment brought up by the Dalit movements (Ilaiah 2001; Rao 2009; Omvedt 2003) did not intrude into the world of Dalit plantation workers. Other trade unions are well-rooted in the plantation politics and are very much part of the trade union activism in the region ever since the formation of modern Kerala.

The trade union leaders possess tremendous influence on the plantation production and they are the ones who are locally legitimised to engage in bargaining on behalf of the workers with the planters. They are the one who negotiate with the plantation management in determining the bonus rate, working conditions and any other disputes that arise in the domain of plantation production. It is the trade union leaders who decide who should be promoted from temporary work status to the permanent work status. However, nearly all the trade union leaders are from *outside* the plantation system and have never been workers in the tea estates. Furthermore, most of the trade union leaders belong to Malayalam speaking/socially higher castes (relative to Dalits) like Ezhava/Nadar and Syrian Christians rather than those who belong to the workers' communities. This creates a hierarchical relationship between the trade union leaders and the plantation workers mainly because their social identity is itself hierarchical and the trade union leaders often socio-culturally differentiate themselves from the workers to retain the hierarchical relationship. It is evident from my observation that most of the workers usually address the trade union leaders as 'sir' (a widely used denotation to address someone of higher authority, in this context, in the plantation). Only a minority of the workers that includes the technical workers and supervisors who are associated with the left wing trade unions are able to call them as *Sakhāvu* (which in Malayalam means 'comrades'). In this sense, the leftist trade unions are more egalitarian than the right wing trade unions.

It is primarily through organising certain politics of resistance that the trade union movements make their presence feel in the plantation. The most important of these, is the resistance organised demanding higher annual bonus for the workers. Unfortunately, this resistance by trade union movements, both liberal and radicals, did not yield positive results and the workers in many estates receive only the minimum level of 8.33 % bonus.³⁹ Many of the workers told me that this is a political gimmick planned by the trade union leaders and the planters; where the trade union leaders would organize the resistance for the namesake and later they will accept the minimum bonus level so that the workers will not organise the resistance themselves against the planters. In fact, the unholy alliance between the planters and the trade union leaders is there to an extent that one of the leading trade union leaders' elder brother became the manager of an estate, whereby ironically, it is a trade union leader

³⁹ There is one exception in the year 1994 when the bonus rate was 12 % in the hope plantation. In fact, although 8.33 % is the lowest bonus rate, there are plantations where they pay higher for the workers (for example, AVT company paid 17% many years). The case of this bonus politics is particularly applicable to estates owned by Hope plantations, MMJ plantations and RBT Company.

negotiating with his brother, who is at the top of plantation management, demanding higher bonus for the workers. A similar corruption situation of trade union leadership could also be seen in Munnar tea plantation belt which is similar to the Peermade one. In Munnar, the trade union leaders who belong to both congress and communist parties were residing in the quarters and bungalows owned by the planters. It is only when this paradox was exposed in the media that the higher leadership in their respective movements issued orders to vacate these houses (The Hindu, dated February 10, 2010).

There are local representatives for these trade unions among the plantation workers as well. All the trade unions select someone from the plantation workers to be the convenor of their union in the respective tea estates. Although their role is nominal, they are important one in retaining the workers within the confinement of trade unions. In fact, the local trade union representatives represent the trade union in the estates, rather than representing workers in the trade union. So the workers do not get a chance to represent themselves in the trade union and thus lose the power to negotiate directly with the plantation management.⁴⁰ Also in the more graded hierarchy, local trade union leaders play a major role in maintaining the social order. These local trade union leaders, particularly the convenors of respective trade unions in the plantation are given easy labour tasks as field watcher, security worker, and assistant to field officer/factory managers as an effective tool to maintain the order in the plantation. Once these trade union representatives become part of the non-manual workforce and get close to the plantation management, they become effective check against the potential resistance or expression of resentment against the plantation management.

While the trade union/party ideologies differ at the macro level, they are perceived to be similar by the plantation workers at the local level. In most cases, the trade union affiliation/party membership is a matter of inheritance rather than a choice that the workers make based on reflexive understanding of larger ideological inclinations. This is not a negation of workers' ability to reason his/her political preferences. Because the inheritance of commitment to a trade union itself is a reason for the workers to continue to be part of it; may be as a symbol of loyalty to their parents. At the same time, they do change their trade union

⁴⁰ There was only one Tamil plantation worker, M. Balu, who in the entire Peermade tea belt became a prominent trade union leader by becoming the District president of INTUC, but was killed few years ago allegedly by a hostile political party.

affiliation due to practical reasons. For instance, if there is a conflict between two families who belong to the same trade union, then the trade union being hard to be neutral, may prefer one family over the other. Subsequently the family which was neglected by the trade union would move to another trade union. They also make a shift to various trade unions if they feel that they are not helped by the trade union/political party in certain issues inside as well as outside plantation. For instance, as it is on the basis of trade union that the workers are moved from temporary status to permanent status in the plantation, and if the trade union does not nominate someone's name in this regard, they mostly make a shift as a sign of revenge and also as a form of resistance against their neglect.

During the normal functioning of the plantation, workers have to contribute a monthly remittance called *Chanthā* of Rs. 40 towards the functioning of the trade unions. Sometimes it varies though this is a standard one. For instance, workers are charged higher during political elections, and party/trade union conferences. While this practice have been stopped since the closure of many plantations due to the crisis, and the trade unions have sought new ways to mobilise finance to function in the Plantation belt.

The recent tea crisis has opened more opportunities for the local political elites (trade union leaders) to make their presence much stronger in the plantation society. They are in the negotiation seat with the employers to reopen the closed estates. But most of these negotiation meetings do not produce positive results as seen in the case of bonus politics. In the meanwhile, they are also coordinating the selling of tea leaves in these closed estates and distributing the return to the workers. This makes them an undisputable authority in the plantation system by any means. This will be discussed in detail in the chapter five.

Caste and the plantation system

The various outcaste groups' decision to move to the plantation was an attempt to escape the caste based bonded slavery and the production of poverty associated with it. This outcaste status of the workers and their hereditary occupation (that is the manual work), being an economic phenomenon of the caste based Hindu ritual order, was used by the colonial planters to place them at the lowest category of the plantation order and thus to create a rigid class order in the plantation. The plantation workers faced less caste based discrimination and more class based prejudices since the ritual part of the caste system which is rooted in pure-

impure relation was suspended in the class based plantation system.⁴¹ Thus the workers' lower status was reflected in terms of class structure rather than caste hierarchy in due course of plantation production. In addition, the absence of caste rigidity is evident from the fact that the implications of caste order was very loose at the higher level of the plantation system where the higher castes ranges from Brahmins to Syrian Christians⁴² could be part of ownership or the management of the plantation and were able to move in between these positions beyond any caste restrictions. Therefore, Caste in the plantation is an atrophied form which is not endogamous and has no connotations of ritual purity or pollution (Jayawardane 1963).

However, it should be accepted that the caste system in its abstract form was a major factor in bringing different caste groups into the plantation and in creating occupational order in the plantation system. This was clearly evident particularly in the post-colonial phase where the caste in its atrophied form was very much present in the plantation class structure with Brahmins, Nairs and Syrian Christians at the top as the owners/managers,⁴³ most backward castes –such as Ezhavas/Nadars and Vellalas- and lower class Christians at the middle as superintendants/ field officers/clerks/supervisors and Dalits such as Pallar, Paraiyar, Chakkiliyar and Arunthathiyar and Dalit Christians at the very bottom as supervisors and wage workers.⁴⁴ Furthermore, this symbiotic relationship between caste and class seems to facilitate the naturalization of the class order in the plantation.

⁴¹ That is to say, caste identity is placed out of its ritual and cosmological context and thus the role of caste in the plantation was distinct from its original function of maintaining a brahmanical caste order. So caste in the plantation is very different from the ritually defined hierarchical caste system within which economic functions are nested.

⁴² Although Syrian Christians are out of Hindu caste hierarchy in its ritual implications, they are conceived the role of vaishya (merchant) caste in the context of Kerala society since there is no merchant caste present in Kerala's caste system. This informal accommodation of the Syrian Christians within Kerala's social hierarchy in relation to other castes provided them opportunities to engage in plantation business. Therefore, in the social hierarchy, the Syrian Christians are positioned higher to the Dalits (cf. Dumont, 1980; Fuller, 1976; Jeffry 1976).

⁴³ For example, In Peermade tea belt, prominent Syrian Christians plantation owners include, A V George and family who owns Ashly and Stack brook estates; A V Thomas & Company who owns Carady Goody, Vasupidungi, and Pasuparai estates; Palamadam family, a prominent Christian family based in Kottayam who owns Periyar Estate; MMJ Group of Companies owned by a prominent Syrian Christian family from Pala owns Churakulam, Bonami, Vagamon and Kottamalai estates; POABS group whose chairman P A Jacob is a Syrian christian who owns Pasumalai, Manjumalai and Pambanar tea estates. Similarly Kozhikanam, Thangamalai and Mount estates are owned by Ram Bahathur Takur Company, a venture of a Brahmin family from Bihar; and Koduakarnam, Ladrum, Glenmary and Woodlands estates are owned by Hope Plantations, an enterprise of a Bengali high caste family.

⁴⁴ Almost 90 % of the workforce in the plantations in Peermade belong to Dalit community with rest of the 10% comprises workers belong to non-Dalit Nadar/Vellala/Ezhava castes. This is not to say that all these minority-communities are present in every estate in the belt. But we could see at least a few members from one of these communities working in all the plantations. Most of these non-Dalit workers are scattered through supervisory

Within this class order, caste identity did not yield superior status in everyday interaction in the plantation because the plantation system itself is the social system in the plantation, and the everyday interaction in the plantation is conditioned by the production process itself. It means that, although Nadars, Vellalas and Ezhavas are higher castes when compared to Dalits, they do not enjoy a superior status within the social domain of workers' society. But the non-Dalits who are at the supervisory and other skilled positions will be respected given to the higher position in the occupational hierarchy. This is the same case in the graded caste hierarchy within the Dalits. While Pallar and Paraiyar castes are considered superior to Chakkiliar and Vannan castes within the caste hierarchy among Dalits, the higher Dalit caste status does not wield any social power as they are not acknowledged by the Chakkiliars and other castes considered lower than the Pallars and Paraiyars. Also, this egalitarian practice is rooted in them since they belong to the same category in the occupational hierarchy. Although the Dalit workforce belongs to different castes and sub castes, they have to live together in the *layam*, and have to draw water from the same pipe. All these facts demonstrate that the traditional structure of caste does not operate in the plantation system. But caste is important as an encompassing/abstract status that legitimises the loose hierarchy in the production system.

But there are occasions when their caste consciousness comes into the social relation as an attempt to reformulate the particular social identity/category (that is of caste and sub-castes) that primarily mediates social relations in the places of their social origin in Tamil Nadu.⁴⁵ For example, people who belong to the same sub-caste greet each other with kinship terms meant for blood relatives, which they do not usually use when they refer to the people who belong to other castes/sub castes, although the relation between different caste and sub-castes have least significance in mediating social relations, for example, as in the case of having same temples and sharing food irrespective of caste identity. Like *Mama/Athai* (means maternal uncle/maternal aunty or the husband of father's sister/wife of mother's brother) or *Chithappa/Chithi* (means Father's Younger Brother or the husband of mother's younger sister/mother's younger Sister or wife of father's younger brother). This act of reformulating caste identity outside the workplace is also an example of the communalization of caste, a

and skilled (such as plumber and mechanic) occupations within the plantation system. Although they belong to non-Dalit castes which are nonetheless low ranked castes in the traditional caste hierarchy and these non-Dalits along with Dalits is termed as Dalit-bahujans (cf. Ilaiah 1996).

⁴⁵ This situation parallels with Clyde Mitchell's study of Kalela Dance in Zambian copper belt (1956) that although the social relations in the copper belt was largely determined by the production system itself, the social relation outside the work situation is largely influenced by differences in tribal membership (Kapferer 1995)

process of attempts to differentiate with others to enhance the social status/prestige. As Jayawardane points out in the context of Indian labourers in British Guiana, a high caste can add to, and a lower caste can detract from, the prestige of a status achieved on other grounds (1963).

Social practices, communal solidarity and the plantation society

The social order in the plantation, as mentioned above, is primarily conditioned by the class structure in the plantation. This phenomenon, in addition to the alienation of the workers from the rigid Tamil culture of their social origin, creates flexibilities and egalitarianism in the social practices such as religious rituals and gift exchanges in cultural ceremonies. It is this flexibility of religious practices and rituals which cleared path for the massive conversion to Christianity in the plantation. In fact, the conversion to Christianity is systematic with the suspension of the ritual system or hierarchy of caste.

Within the Peermade tea belt, Hindus are majority in the Vandiperiyar area in contra to the Elappara area where converted Dalit Christians form the majority. Thus Christians and Hindus are almost equal in number with Hindus having an upper hand over the Christians (around 60% of Hindus and 40% of Christians) in the tea belt with a negligible number of Muslims.

The Hinduism of the plantation workers differ from mainstream Hinduism. The mainstream Hinduism is dictated by the Vedic texts and is rooted in brahmanical interpretation of the texts and Hindu theology. In contrary, the plantation workers belong to *Dalit* communities whose Hindu practices are rooted in historically evolved ritual practices related to their clan deities (See Ilaiah 1996). Although the Hindu plantation workers worship mainstream Hindu deities such as *Mariamman*, a Tamil version of mother goddess, their ritual practices are based on the requirements of their clan deities such as *Ayyanar*, *Munieeswaran* and *Sudalai Madan*. These deities and the rituals associated with it are specific to Dalit Hindu practices and not dictated by the Vedic texts or other brahmanical rituals.

In the tea belt in general, members of all castes are accommodated in the temple rituals and everyone have the right to enter into the temple without any caste discrimination. Also, Members from different castes are included in the temple committee irrespective of their caste, and the temple priest (*Poosāri*) is selected irrespective of caste identity. This is given to

the fact that caste, as mentioned above, became weak and less relevant in the class order of plantation production. Although there are exceptions for this caste unity as in the case of Thangamalai where each caste have their own temples,⁴⁶ caste solidarity is maintained through foregoing equal consideration of different castes within the plantation workers. This is evident from the fact that although workers in Thangamalai have caste-based temples, people are permitted to enter into the temple irrespective of caste identity and to carry out the ritual offerings. People do take part in the ritual offerings in other temples and no communal violence or related tensions for having separate temple has been reported here. So it is clear from this caste egalitarianism and solidarity that the caste identity as such does not yield social power in the plantation. This contrasts with the caste rigidity and discrimination that their relatives face today in Tamil Nadu where the access to temples is restricted due to the strict practice of the caste system.⁴⁷ In sum, in the Peermade tea belt, most of the religious practices of the workers are locally adapted forms of larger Tamil culture, and must be understood as distinct one in the context of plantation as a total institution where the labour system is the basis for social order.

As mentioned above, around 40% of the Tamil workers' families are converted to Christian faiths particularly to Pentecostal mission. Primarily they are second and third generation Hindu converts to Christian denominations like Pentecost mission (with various groups within it such as Believer's Church, Siloam Church and Global Mission), CSI (Christians of South India), Salvation Army and a small number to Roman Catholics.⁴⁸ As mentioned above, the conversion rate is higher in the estates around Elappara town and Pambanar town than in the Vandiperiyar town. In Ashly estate which is close to Elappara town, more than 90% of the population are converted to Pentecostal and CSI (Christians of South India) missions. Even though a considerable part of plantation workers in the Elappara area are part of a larger community of Dalit Christians today, they retain strong family ties with their relatives who are not converted and continue to be Hindus. But a strong anti-conversion sentiment is present

⁴⁶ In Thangamalai estate, workers who belong to different castes have their own temples. Chakkiliar caste (consists of sixty families) have their own temple where the principle deity is Kaliaswamy, their clan deity. Those who belong to Pallar caste worship Mariamman and they are in the process of building a temple. People of Paraiyar caste have their own temple with their clan deity called Madaswamy as the principle deity. The expenses incurred for the temple festivals and weekly rituals are divided among those who belong to the particular caste.

⁴⁷ For example, in rural Tamil Nadu, if there is a common temple in the village, different castes organise temple festivals differently and *Dalits* are permitted to organise their temple festivals only after the upper castes organise the festivals.

⁴⁸ See Kooiman 1991 for detailed discussion on the history of Christian conversion of plantation labour in Kerala.

in the estates like Thangamalai where Hindu nationalist movement is trying to create a stronghold mainly through those who belongs to Ezhava caste. In fact, the minority Ezhava are stronger in the plantation and try to popularise the brahmanical rituals and to unite (homogenise) Hindu practices. This is in fact part of larger processes of Hindu nationalist attempt to create a Hindu vote bank through homogenising Hindu factions.

Egalitarianism in social relations is also evident from the balanced reciprocity in gift exchanges and extension of unbiased invitation to all workers cultural ceremonies such as marriage and rites of passages. Invitations to wedding ceremonies are extended to all the estate workers and participation in the ceremony or at least in the tea party that follows the wedding is considered obligatory in the estate, there is unless some personal animosity. In the reception (that is the tea party) whoever attends have to give a gift in the form of money called *Moi* (Dumont 1957; Rudner 1995). However, those who organise the reception (family of the bride or groom) record it in a notebook so that they could contribute the same amount or little more of money in return, which is similar to Mauss's argument that gifts are never free (Mauss 2002) and it is in fact a loan that needs to be paid back (Bourdieu 1977). But this does not mean that the presentation of gifts is publicly acknowledged as loan nor does it bring a higher social status. These are balanced exchanges, a perfect reciprocity, which mean that it is not a hierarchical system in which the gift signifies higher and lower status.

Thus, the communal solidarity is ensured through the egalitarian nature of these practices that strengthen inter-personal relations. Furthermore, most of the Christians are first or second generation converts and the Hindus in the plantations are none other than their relatives. In fact, both Christian and Hindu festivals are celebrated by all families in the plantation, although the aspects of worship and ritual are performed only by those who belong to the particular religion. Moreover, as Martinez discusses in the Caribbean case, there is a strong solidarity among workers which comes from their shared sense of standing in a subordinate relationship to management and their view of themselves as being people of low status in the wider society (Martinez 2007). Such obligations of kinship, gift and participation in ceremonies, and their imagination of being socioeconomically identical such as common residence and similarity in opportunity and style of life (Jayawardane 1963) contributed to create more an egalitarian society among the plantation workers.

But this egalitarianism and solidarity is threatened with the exposure of plantation workers to the outside society in the crisis context where their social identities particularly that of religious has huge cleavage in their ideology and practices. This exposure to a cosmopolitan (outside) society and workers' further varied experiences in relation to their social identities generate huge cleavage in the plantation society and threaten their collective solidarity. This is critically discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE

CRISIS RIDDEN PLANTATIONS: WORKERS IN THE NEW CONDITION

The economic crisis: the context and consequences

The economic crisis that hit the Indian tea industry lasted for more than a decade (from the mid 1998 to the end of 2008) and its effects continue till today. The rising costs of production, falling prices of tea, over supply of tea in the world market and low quality tea imported from Sri Lanka to India for re-export were cited as major causes for the crisis (Jain.N.K. ed. 2008). In fact, it is the liberalization of international trade which is the primary cause of the economic crisis. This liberalization led to an increase in the supply of comparatively cheap tea from Kenya and Sri Lanka in the world market that displaced the market that Indian tea was enjoying. Furthermore, reforms of the India economy, principally based on IMF and World Bank-dictated structural adjustment policies, led to the liberalisation of import restrictions for tea. It proved to be an asset for the Indian tea traders who in order to survive in the international competition of tea, imported low-quality Sri Lankan tea at cheap prices to mix it with the Indian tea and sell it then in the international tea market. Unfortunately, this proved to be detrimental when this poor-quality tea could not retrieve demand in the international tea market. Furthermore, opening up of domestic tea market in India for the more cheaply-produced Sri Lankan and Kenyan tea led to a decrease in the domestic price of tea.

While the liberalization of trade is a basic cause of the recent economic crisis, there are also local factors contributing to the crisis and sustaining it. The senior research officer at the Tea Research Foundation in Vandiperiyar told me that the Peermade Belt is comprised of old plantations and the tea bushes are nearing the end of their productive life. This and other productive costs combined with the global market fluctuations and uncertainties have made the plantations increasingly commercially-unprofitable.

The economic logic proposed in International Economics and Trade is very relevant to the understanding of the crisis. The argument of the classic economics pioneered by Adam Smith and David Ricardo, which became a foundation principle to the neo-liberal economic reform in the developing world that the countries should produce the commodities in which they have lower opportunity cost (which means higher comparative advantage) is the logic behind

liberalization of tea trade in which Kenya and Sri Lanka have a comparative advantage over India as they have cheaper labour force and more productive efficient than India.⁴⁹ This insistence on the comparative advantage led Indian plantations to seek out other options like plantation tourism⁵⁰ and further mechanisation of the production process that will diminish the labour force. The transition cost of this shift, however, is passed on to the workers as described below in this case. The crisis brought by the global comparative advantage combined with the local reasons is similar to the situation of workers in the Zambian copper belt where the slump in the production of copper effectively closed down the mines and resulted in massive unemployment where the similar ‘comparative advantage’ logic of capitalism proved to be disastrous (Ferguson 1999, pp 239-240) not only to the workers but to the entire Zambian economy.

The crisis, as an effect of economic liberalization and other local factors, was like an earthquake that shattered the plantation system. As briefly discussed in the first chapter, the plantation workers are the major victims of the economic crisis and are deeply wounded by the abandoning of tea plantations. They are also subjected to serious socio-cultural transformations as the crisis gave a severe blow to what is meant to be normal life in the plantation. Many estates were abandoned and others had their operations run down. The factories were closed and the plucking was effectively parcelled out to the workers for sale in the open market. RBT Company owned nine tea estates that included the three estates *Pasumalai*, *Thangamalai* and *Koliekanam* which were part of my fieldwork location. All the nine estates were abandoned between 1999 and 2000.

The abandoning of plantations, as recalled by *Kanakamma*, a 64 year old women who is a tea plucking worker in *Pasumalai* estate, was a totally new phenomenon and a shock to the local people as they have never experienced such situation before. As I was sitting in her ‘house’ in the estate *layam*, *Kanakamma* told me that there were temporary lockouts⁵¹ of the tea estates

⁴⁹ No wonder, the situation of Tamil tea plantation workers in Sri Lanka is in miserable condition compared to their Indian counterparts since they are paid very less wage than Indian plantation workers. Moreover, now, TATA TEA, the largest tea company in India and second largest in the world, has established a joint venture tea company in Vietnam and is in the process of taking plantations in Ethiopia to take advantage of cheap labour (<http://www.financialexpress.com/news/Companies-eye-overseas-gardens/620055>).

⁵⁰ Tea gardens related tourism projects have been well established in Sri Lanka and China. These projects called ‘tea tourism’ are increasingly seen as a means of generation of local revenue (Joliffe 2007). This is discussed in the last section of this chapter in detail.

⁵¹ The lockout means temporary closure of the plantation during abnormal situation in the plantation. This is a major tactic followed by plantation managements whenever the workers agitate against their ill treatment.

earlier, particularly when the workers organised strikes against the low bonus rate. But, she added, that the workers expected that the estate will reopen sooner or later once the trade union leaders negotiate with the plantation. But now, she continues to lament in Tamil “*ini avlavuthaan, estate ini pazhayathu maathiri aakaathu*” {which colloquially means: “We are finished. I don’t think estate will go back to normal (old) days}. These concerned words of *Kanakamma* clearly reflect the current scenario of the workers' imagination of what their future is going to be. That is, the workers are abandoned nearly for a decade with total uncertainty over their future. Many of them, especially the temporary workers, had to go out of the plantation in search of new means of subsistence. They were never familiar with this outside world which for them is like releasing an infant child born and brought up in the prison to the outside world. Their helplessness coupled with their creative attempts to find new means of existence mark their everyday life today.

As mentioned above, the worst phase of the crisis was between 2002 and 2007. There have been eight cases of suicide incidents and 12 deaths due to starvation and denial of medical care, since the crisis in the tea industry began. Of these, one was of a 14 years old school girl, *Velankanni*, from *Pasumalai* estate who hung herself. The reason given by her father was that she felt humiliated by the taunts of her school friends for wearing a torn school uniform borrowed by her parents from someone. When *Velankanni* committed suicide, the post-mortem revealed that there was no trace of food in her intestine (The Hindu Report dated 28/09/2003). I met her father *Devasahayam* during my fieldwork. He was reluctant to talk to me initially as he thought I am a newspaper journalist and he did not like to talk about the tragic death of his daughter. Later by seeing one of my friends with me who is familiar to the girl’s father, he agreed to have a short conversation. He told me that *Velankanni* committed suicide due to shame over the deprivation, and he could not manage to buy her things since he is suffering from some health issues and is unable to do physically demanding work. Nonetheless he had to work inside as well as outside the plantation from the very beginning of the crisis since his wife stayed back at home as she could not find work. So the family of six members had to survive with the income of the father and the deprivation resulted in the tragic death of *Velankanni*.

From plantation factory system to co-operative subsistence system: new means of subsistence in the plantation

In abandoned plantations, workers began to survive by plucking the tea leaves and selling them to the local wholesale (tea leaves) merchants or their agents. However, there are variations in how this is organised between different estates. In few estates the tea plucking is done individually and in some estates it is carried out collectively. I will provide two different cases of how this is organised drawing examples from *Thangamalai* and *Koliekanam* estates.

A) In *Thangamalai*, which was locked out in 1999, a co-operative initiative was launched under which a labour committee was formed to manage the plucking of the green leaves, sell them in the local market, and monitor the distribution of the amount among workers. The labour committee is of eight members, consisting of representatives from trade unions, estate staff, supervisors and workers.⁵² The trade union representatives will usually be the convenor of the particular trade union in the tea estate. However, they are subjected to the control of the higher authorities in the trade union whose offices are located in the nodal towns. The labour committee changes every month, whereas the trade union representatives are retained in the committee.

Under this new routine, workers only work for three days a week (and that is also only half day). Usually they go to work at 9am and will finish the plucking by 12.30pm. These short working hours are because of the poor yield due to lack of fertilisers and further care for the tea bushes. The total amount of plucked leaves will be taken by the labour committee to the town and will be sold to the wholesale merchant. The amount received will be divided equally among workers. However, according to Sivan, a 46 year old male supervisor and also a member of the labour committee, usually the workers receive approximately Rs. 70 per day for three days per week which means that a worker receives around Rs. 840 per month from

⁵² One of my informants told me that there is a competition to get into the committee as the members share the unofficial dividend received from the contractor (wholesale merchant of the tea leaves who gets the leaves at lower rate due to his association with the labour committee). It is also alleged that the committee sell the leaves at lower price than the market price because of their unholy alliance with the contractor. Accordingly, the workers do not receive the amount to which they are entitled. While I heard the same allegation from few other informants also, this could also be a new structure of suspicion in the crisis context where the increasing insecurity creates a tension within the workers' society which led to an atmosphere of strong mistrust between the workers.

the tea plucking. As in most cases, the wife and the husband engage in the plucking, the couple receive around Rs.1680 per month.

B) In *Koliekanam* estate, the plucking was done individually. The tea bushes are distributed among the workers by the trade unions: each *varushathaal* (permanent worker) is allotted 1500 tea bushes and each temporary worker (*vaarthaal*) is allotted 500 bushes.⁵³ But these bushes are very old and do not provide reasonable yield. A permanent worker's family (with both husband and wife working) get approximately Rs. 2000 per month. The temporary workers' family receive only one by third of the amounts made by permanent workers in this regard (i.e. approximately Rs. 670) as the couple will have only 1000 bushes. Moreover, the workers often mortgage the bushes allotted to them to mobilise money for emergency situations such as healthcare/marriage and also because they are often unable to buy herbicides and fertilisers for the bushes. They try to find work outside the plantations once they mortgage the bushes.

Although the plucking was done individually, the workers who belong to particular trade unions are required to sell the green leaves they pluck only to their trade union representatives for a lower rate than the market rate.⁵⁴ One of my informants who is also a trade union activist in the *Thangamalai* estate told me that the trade unions now sought new sources for financing their activities (including the livelihood means of the trade unions' full time workers/leaders) as they do not receive the monthly *chantha* (payment) anymore from its member workers in the plantation after the crisis. So the trade unions here gets money from the contractors or wholesale merchants who get the contract for the tea leaves plucked in the plantations. He added that this is considered to be an "*Ooraraincha Rahasiyam*" (means a 'secret' that everybody knows). Accordingly, a major transformation is occurring via the crisis where the trade union is transformed from an intermediary/ a negotiating institution between management and workers into a managing authority which supervises and co-ordinates the co-operative set-up as seen in both *Thangamalai* and *Koliekanam* estates.

⁵³ The manager of the plantation who was also an employee before the crisis was allotted 10 acres of land and the allotment was made by trade union convenors in the estate. A worker in the estate told me that this was an unjust allotment because 10 acres of land is a very generous allotment and part of this land could have been used to provide more bushes to the temporary workers.

⁵⁴ For instance, when the market rate for 1 kg of green leaves was 10 rupees in the local market, the workers had to sell it for 7 rupees to the trade union designated intermediary.

The estates which were not abandoned, such as Koduvakarnam under Hope Plantations and Ashly under AVG Company (see the map of the tea belt in the third chapter) confined their working in the plantations to plucking tea leaves and closed down tea processing in their factories. The management also reduced the number of working days in the plantation to three or four days a week. Workers were not paid their wages regularly and the plantation management assured the workers that they will pay the deferred wages once the estate comes back to the normal life. However, the workers are given a small weekly payment; what they call as *chelavu kaasu* (which means money to spend/survive). A worker is paid Rs.300 per week⁵⁵ if the worker comes to work on all working days during the previous week. If the worker fails to come for one day, Rs.50 will be cut off from their *chelavu kaasu*. Under this system, a couple is managed to get around Rs. 2400 per month.

There are few other engagements, in addition to this new set-up in the plantation, that supplement the income of the workers. The most important of these supplementary engagements are raising cattle and chickens. Only few families own cattle and in most of the cases the families own not more than one cow or ox. The same case applies to the chicken as not every family in the plantation society owns it. For instance, in Koduakarnam estate, about 81 families out of 385 families (21%) own chicken and 96 families (24%) own cattle. While cow milk is sold outside and thus supplements the income of the family, chicken eggs are consumed within the family. The cattle owning family supplement around Rs. 300 per month through sale of cow milk. In addition to this domestic enterprise, there are few in the plantation who occupy small pieces of land⁵⁶ called *Puthuveli* (which literally means ‘new fence’) in the remote hilly terrains outside the plantation for small-scale tea/cardamom cultivation. The average income through the cultivation varies from Rs. 600 to Rs. 1000 which depends on the size of the land and the productivity of the tea plants. But this venture helps only very few since these plots are occupied by estate supervisors and few enterprising workers who are at the top of social leadership. So in the present situation, the cultivation in these land could be considered only as a supplementary source to very few people due to the small size of the land, its poor yield (as most of the terrain is rocky) and only very small proportion of workers’ population own these lands.

⁵⁵ Before the crisis, this weekly payment amount was Rs. 200 which will be deducted from the daily wages given monthly. But as the workers are not paid their daily wages monthly due to the crisis, the *chelavu kasu* was increased to Rs. 300.

⁵⁶ These small pieces of land usually range from .25 acre to 1.5 acre.

These hilly terrains are also occupied by few families whose older members are retired as workers from the plantation and do not have children who could continue working in the plantation to retain the residence in the estate lines. But in most cases, those who occupied the land do not own this land legally (this means that the government did not acknowledge the claim of individual ownership). To own these lands, the person who occupied the land needs a government approval/certification called *pattayam*. This *pattayam* is granted to few pieces of land, and others still await government approval. This makes the people who occupy the land lead an insecure life since they are not sure if it will continue to be their land.

Since it is nearly impossible to survive with the income from the tea plucking under the new set-up, the men in abandoned as well as few from partially working plantations go to work in nearby tea estates or in cardamom/tea gardens of small scale planters/land holders in the outskirts of their respective estate on days other than the working days in the plantations. This outside work is paid at the rate of around Rs. 150 per day. However, the outside work is not guaranteed daily and the workers' find work only for 10 days which means men could manage to increase the household income by Rs. 1500.

In the meantime, most of the women engage in NREG scheme (the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme)⁵⁷ of the Ministry for Rural Development under the central government, which aims at enhancing the livelihood security of the people in rural areas by guaranteeing hundred days of wage-employment in a financial year to a rural household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work (National Rural Employment Act 2005). Under this scheme, registered workers will be assigned manual jobs in community development related works like cleaning the common spaces and repairing the roads etc. In the Peermade tea belt, this scheme benefits old people who are retired from the plantation but did not receive their retirement benefits from the plantation owner yet. The scheme also helps young women who were working as temporary workers in the plantation and who no more obtain work opportunities in the respective plantations. This scheme provides the worker with a monthly income of roughly around Rs.1000. But the payment often is kept pending for no significant reasons.

⁵⁷ This scheme is applicable to both the abandoned and partially working plantations.

Here is an example: While I was waiting in the corridors of Vandiperiyar Panchayat Office for an interview with the vice-president of the Panchayat, I met few workers under this scheme from Periyar estate who were waiting to obtain a sanction from the Panchayat office for their withheld payment under the NREG Scheme. They were discussing what should be done if they did not get the sanction on that particular day. I introduced myself as a research student working on the plantation issue and politely asked them what happened to their payment. One elderly worker who seems to be the unofficial leader of the group responded promptly. He was so friendly and without any reluctance he told me that their payment is postponed for more than a month allegedly because a clerk who is responsible for registering their payment voucher is on leave. He added that the absence of a clerk seems not a genuine reason, and that he doubts that somebody is mishandling their money. As for most of the elderly population this scheme seems to be a primary source of subsistence, the withheld of the payment did in fact cause huge misery to their lives over a month.

Furthermore, it should be noted here that every family does not benefit from the NREG scheme, but at the same time, for most of the workers engaged in the NREG scheme, it is the major and only source of income. This is especially in the case of old people where both the husband and wife work under this scheme and earn a monthly income of Rs. 2000. In the case of young women who were temporary workers, their income from NREG comes as an addition to the money earned by their husband from sources usually outside the plantation.

In sum, the foregoing description of different situation of subsistence economy reveals that a worker family averagely consisting of five members per family managed to make around Rs. 2500 to 4000, which is actually a very meagre income to survive for a plantation household with an average of five members in a family in present day rural Kerala. To Quote Jean Drèze, a famous Indian economist: “For a family of five to have reasonably good nutrition, nothing like meat or fish or any such thing, but just one egg per person per day, one banana, some dhal, some vegetables, a reasonably balanced diet - it would cost more than Rs.200 (\$4.4; £3) per family per day”.⁵⁸ So while a family needs at least Rs. 6000 for basic survival, the workers’ family roughly earns only half of it, which is Rs. 3000. Furthermore, extraordinary price rise and increasing cost of subsistence in Kerala compared to many other states haunt the plantation workers. Also, the non-subsistent consumption that includes, in this

⁵⁸ BBC news story, ‘Diet of mud and despair in Indian village’ dated 15 May 2010 http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/8682558.stm.

case, monthly costs incurred on television channels and telephone connections (with the advent of communication revolution in India) is an additional burden for the plantation families.⁵⁹

Large expenses, debt cycle and the workers

In addition to the income earned through the new tea plucking set-up and through manual work in the immediate outskirts, there are self-help groups (*sangham*) in the plantations which receive collateral-free loans from the State as well as from nearby banks under the micro credit programme of national and state governments. Although they were established as part of a larger self-help group/micro-credit revolution in the developing world, the activities of these groups became intensified after the crisis began. I have attended four weekly meetings usually organised on Sundays by two self-help groups in Kooliekanam estate. The two groups are named after two historic women figures in India, Jhansi Rani Lakshmi Bai and Indira Priyatharshini.⁶⁰ The groups were formed in October 2003 and February 2004 respectively. So far, they have received a financial loan of three lakh rupees and two lakh rupees respectively from local cooperative banks through banks' collaboration with the state government. They received the loan for financing small scale income-generating activities through collective efforts such as collective farming (such as tea cultivation) by renting land outside the plantation, small-scale animal husbandry (particularly breeding goat), and co-operative mobile market where the group make a bulk purchase of groceries in the nodal market at a cheaper rate and sell it in their estates. A subsidy for the loan is also granted by government agencies that vary from 30% to 50% of the loan amount.

But the loan they get for self employment opportunities is not spent on self employment. Instead, it is divided among individual members and each member receives around ten to fifteen thousand rupees after deducting the processing charges. The amount, as I have observed during my fieldwork, is used for expensive necessities like expenditure on health care, education of their children, marriage ceremonies (particularly to pay dowry) or for paying back the debt borrowed from money lenders at a very high interest rate. As the hospitals in the plantations have been closed down due to the economic crisis (or under the

⁵⁹ Television cable operators in two of the closed estates told me that they are also affected by the crisis as many of the workers have large dues which the cable operators are unable to retrieve due to the crisis.

⁶⁰ Jhansi Rani Lakshmi Bai was a Maratha queen who fought against the British and Indira Priyatharshini popularly known as Indira Gandhi, was the first and only woman prime minister of independent India. Almost all women self-help groups in the tea belt are named after few eminent women personalities.

disguise of economic crisis), the workers are forced to spend huge amounts of money on health care. A medical consultant and medicine for a common illness such as fever cost at least Rs. 150. But anything beyond a common illness would indebt the worker for a long time and sometimes forever. Moreover, the government hospitals in the Peermade region are neither well equipped nor efficient as government hospitals in other places in the district. It could be because of the fact that most of the people in the region (i.e. the tea estate workers) largely relied on the hospitals run by the plantations before the beginning of the crisis. So, the recent crisis has put more pressure on the least efficient government-run hospitals.

Furthermore, even though pre-collegiate education is free in Kerala's public schools, the bitter incidents, such as the suicide of Velankanni for not having a decent school uniform to wear, reveal that the workers still have to spend a considerable amount on the school education of their children. So the loan amount is the only source of large amount in the current situation. Also, while the amount is a large one for a worker's family, in most cases the family would have debt that is higher than the loan amount they receive. Hence, while the micro credit movement is primarily aimed at poverty reduction, their contribution is very little to the subsistence economy in the tea estates since the loan amount is spent on expensive but necessary consumptions such as marriage/medical care. Although the loan amount is not used for self-employment opportunities, women payback the monthly dues of the loan amount - that includes the bank interest for the loan- on time with the income from their daily work. They have also a small program of savings where each member of the group contributes with Rs. 15 to 20 per week towards the group savings. These savings are lent to group members on a nominal interest rate, but only in the case of emergencies such as the hospitalisation of a family member of the group member. That small saving includes the provisions for social services like sponsoring public events in the estates.

Notwithstanding the fact that the loan amount is an instant relief to the workers, very low monthly earning force the workers to approach money lenders for more loan at a high interest rate.⁶¹ This high interest rate traps the workers into a debt cycle and further perpetuates it. I was observing an interaction between Shanmugam, a 45 years old male worker in Koduakarnam estate and a money lender. The money lender agreed to pay him one thousand rupees with an interest of 10% per month based on the agreement that Shanmugam will

⁶¹ In fact, the loan amount, as mentioned above, is used to payback the debt borrowed from money lenders who are mainly from Tamil Nadu.

payback the whole amount in two months. The full interest amount for the payback period is taken from the lent amount. That is Shanmugam only received Rs.800 since 10% of Rs.1000 for two months is Rs.200. So in effect, the interest rate is much more than 10% per month, which is 12.5% per month. After observing the whole episode, I interacted with Shanmugam after the money lender left the place. He told me that he needed the money to send it to his two children studying in Cumbum, a small town in Tamil Nadu close to Kerala's border. He further explained me that the money lender lent him one thousand rupees now because he successfully paid back six hundred rupees along with the interest borrowed from this particular money lender earlier. Furthermore, he was happy that he could gain the trust of the money lender so that it would be easy for him now to borrow more money from the money lender as well as he will be able to convince the money lender to lend money to his friends. This persisting indebtedness and consequent impoverishment shows that the debt bondage that brought their ancestors to the plantation continues to haunt them and bound them within their social reproduction as the lowest class/ community in the society, although the nature of debt bondage differs.

While they rely on self-help group-loan and money lenders for larger expenses, they largely depend on grocery shops in their respective nodal towns for buying day-to-day necessities. The workers would not always have ready-cash to buy rice and vegetables and they have to buy it using credit from the stationary merchants. In such situations, a worker will be introduced to particular stationary shop owner by anyone of his/her co-workers who are already permanent customers of the shop and holds a good relationship with the shop owner. The shop owner will agree to provide the commodities for credit after an informal assurance from the new customer-worker that he will remain a permanent customer for the shop. In this way, the workers establish a relationship with the owners of grocery shops in their respective nodal towns.

During my fieldwork, I have seen workers discussing which merchant is more humane and friendly in dealing with his customers. Here humane mean how far he/she trust the workers and what is the credit limit in the particular shop. Shop owners or their representatives go to estates lines to collect the credit amounts on every Saturday, (the day of *chelavu kasu* that I have mentioned earlier) and on days when workers receive their monthly wage payments. Although this is the common practice, it is considered a big insult if the merchant yell at the worker by standing in front of their workers' residents for not paying back the due amount.

The merchant –worker relationship was much stronger and better before the crisis as the workers were able to pay the credit back on time when the plantations were functioning properly. So during my fieldwork days, the merchant-worker relationship ruined to the extent that the shop owners almost stopped providing commodities on credit for the plantation workers. Also the business in the nodal towns ruined since it depended on the purchasing power of the workers. This transformation in the relationship between the merchant and the worker indicates the weakening of ancillary institutions that developed around the plantation system in order to support it.

Thus the subsistence economy of workers in the midst of the crisis oscillated between the labour work inside and outside the plantation, merchants of the nodal town, money lenders and to a small extent, the self-help groups.

From plantation workers to Dalit migrant workers: disclosed plantations and new arenas of livelihood

The economic crisis opened up (the insulated space of) plantation and exposed the workers to the world outside the plantation, especially in relation to workers' search for new arenas of manual work. After the crisis, there were many male workers who commuted from the plantations to nearby towns and semi-urban areas to work as manual labourers. In the totally closed plantations, women in their family seek work under the NREG Scheme and manual work such as plucking pepper and cardamom in the immediate surrounding areas of the plantation, and women in the partially working plantations stays back and continue working there mainly to maintain the housing facility.⁶² This is the case with *Thamizh Selvam*, a 42 years old male worker who commutes between *Koduvakarnam Estate* - where his wife and mother works - and *Mundakayam* - which is 32 km away from the Koduvakarnam estate - to work as an unskilled labourer in the local construction industry. Another similar case is *Ramesh*, who found work as a foreman (*Mesthri*) for a small construction contractor and he helped many men from Koduvakarnam estate to get work outside the plantation. Those who work in the construction industry receive a reasonable wage of Rs.200 per day. Sometimes workers remain at the work site during working days and visit their families on weekends.

⁶² In the partially working plantations (i.e. where only the tea plucking is done and the factory is closed down), either husband or wife required to continue working in the plantation to retain the free housing in the layam provided by the employer. Usually the male worker in the partially working plantation go to work outside because of lack of proper payment of the wage as mentioned before.

They come back to the plantation on Saturday evening and leave on Monday morning again back to their worksite.

The crisis also forced more and more male workers to seek various manual jobs in *Sabarimala*⁶³ Pilgrimage Centre. They engage in carrying devotees who are unable to walk over the hilly terrain to reach the shrine.⁶⁴ In addition, they do other forms of demeaning low status work, as bearers and as sanitation workers. But this work is very seasonal as they get to work only during the key events of the Sabarimala festival pilgrimage, namely *Mandla Pooja* and *Makara vilakku*. The workers earn at least a monthly income of three thousand to four thousand rupees a month during the ritual season. But the ritual season is only three months a year and they have to find work in other sectors like construction and manual work in small plantations. One of my informants *Mani* from Ladrum estate told me that the work in Sabarimala is quite hard, but the workers could earn a reasonable amount of money during the peak of the pilgrimage season. Mani is a married man and has a daughter. He married during the peak of the crisis in 2003 and he was not given work in the estate in the following years as he was a temporary worker there. Thus he had to find work outside the plantation and he joined a group of estate workers who were engaged in seasonal manual work in Sabarimala. Since then, he is relentlessly working (in his words he is running non-stop) to make both ends meet. Mani told me that although he is only 24 years old, he had suffered a lot in his life and is thinking of going back to *Thiruchi* (Trichy) in Tamil Nadu to assist his cousins in sharecropping in paddy fields. He wants to go to Tamil Nadu, he added, mainly because the cost of living in Tamil Nadu is lower than Kerala, and he could save some money for his daughter's future.

He went on saying further, “Karunanithi (the current chief minister of Tamil Nadu state) is giving 1 kg of *arisi* (rice) for two rupees and *uppu mulaka* (ingredients for making curry), the local soups) could be bought for Rs.100 per week in a ration shop for those who hold a BPL (Below Poverty Line) Card.” In fact, the comparison of the minimum cost of living and state welfare system between Kerala and Tamil Nadu is very common in the casual conversation among the plantation people today. Many of my informants have spontaneously brought up

⁶³ Sabarimala, as mentioned in the third chapter, is a famous pilgrimage centre for Lord Ayyappa devotees, located in the Western Ghats (Sahyathri mountain ranges) in Kerala. The temple is situated on a hilltop at an altitude of 914m above mean sea level, and is surrounded by mountains and dense forests.

⁶⁴ The devotees in Sabarimala have to take a long walk of 18 kilometers over the hilly terrain to reach the shrine which is at the top of the hill.

this comparison during our conversations. This shows that they are very much concerned about the ruling uncertainty brought by the economic crisis. While this is the case with most of the men who opt to work outside the plantation, women sought work in home nursing industry as *velaikāri* (housemaids) and home nurses.⁶⁵ They were also engaged in manual work in textile factories in Tirupur region (in Tamil Nadu), and earlier at fish processing units in Gujarat. But recently young men are also recruited by home nursing agencies to take care of old/sick male people. In fact, home nursing is a new buzz word in the plantation society as more and more girls and boys who are literate and have high school education are recruited by home nursing agencies and are sent to households all over Southern India.

As mentioned above, many of the workers went to Tamil Nadu in search of jobs during the crisis. My interaction with few who are working in retail markets in Chennai reveals that they are living in poor conditions and are highly exploited. For instance, those who work in the retail market industry are paid not more than four thousand rupees per month while they have to work from 8 am to 8 pm which is 12 hours a day, which is illegal according to the Indian labour law since normal working hours for a daily wage are 8 hours. Ex-plantation workers or their children (potential plantation workers) who opted to Tirupur textile industry due to the economic crisis also have similar work duration and pay. They receive an amount of Rs.150 per 12 hour working shift. There are exceptions to this also as one of my informants who rose to occupy the position of a supervisor in the retail mall gets a monthly payment of seven thousand rupees. But this is, as I mentioned, an exception. I asked them if they organize any resistance against their exploitation. Their response, although varies in the language and the words they use, sounded similar in its tone, that is *they can't resist*. They told me further “if you resist, you will not be given work from the following day, and if you continue to give them ‘head-ache’, you will be in deep trouble.”

In fact, it was during my fieldwork days that many families in the plantations began to come out of the real starvation and continues to survive by moving around the urban areas and who are mostly successful in making money to keep their family survive. But this event does not mean that there are families who are still at the extreme edge of poverty and famine.

⁶⁵ There is a distinction between the house maid and home nurses when it comes to the local usage in the plantation today. Housemaids refer to women who are employed in house works like cooking, cleaning, and washing clothes etc. this is similar to its usage in English. Home nurses mean nursing or taking care of older people or those who are sick and bed ridden in a house. Most of the women who work as housemaids are illiterate and are above forty years old in most cases. The home nurses usually are literate and younger (between 18 and 30 years) than the housemaid.

This is especially the case of families with the following criteria:

1. Where the husband and wife are really old people, and they have nobody to look after them. This happens with a husband and wife who do not have a male child to look after them.⁶⁶ This is the case with Sundaram and his wife Lilly in Koduvakarnam Estate.
2. With a single parent usually woman with dependent young children. The widowed/divorced/abandoned mother has to adjust with the *chelava kaasu* if it is in working plantations or with the small amount of money that she receives from plucking tea leaves in the abandoned plantations. For instance, *Kanchana*, 46 years old widow in *Pasumalai* Estate.
3. Where a member of the family is suffering from a serious health issue and the treatment demands money. I have encountered many such families during my fieldwork.

Weakening of the plantation system and suspension of welfare benefits

According to Indian Plantation Labour act of 1951, the workers are provided with many welfare benefits that include housing and latrines facilities, water supply, recreational facilities, crèches for children below five years old, life insurance benefits, medical benefits, sick leave, attendant wage and educational facilities for the children of the workers. This welfare provisions were very much part of the plantation system as a total institution where the plantation management acts as a welfare state. Furthermore, these measures help to contain the social unrest of the workers and thus to preserve the plantation system, although these benefits were partly realised through the trade union movement and their original intention was to ensure social justice (cf. Barr 1998).

However, adding insult to injury, the workers were deprived of their welfare benefits along with cuts in the number of working days under the disguise of the economic crisis. The plantation owners who were strongly lobbying for the State to share what they call as the social cost of the production, now found an opportunity to obliterate the welfare benefits in the midst of the crisis. During one of my interactions with Ms. Beenamol Varghese, Inspector of Plantation (IP) who works for the Department of Labour and is responsible for examining and

⁶⁶ Usually parents avoid staying with female children's family as it is not culturally preferable to stay with a female child.

ensuring the welfare of the workers, told me that whenever she tried to negotiate with the plantation management over the deteriorating conditions of the estate lines and its surroundings, they excused themselves by pointing to the economic crisis.

In the *Ashly estate*, although the estate continues to function, many welfare measures including crèches, canteen, medical dispensary, and labour clubs were closed down following the crisis. Many other facilities that the plantation owner is supposed to provide the workers with, such as umbrellas, blankets, rain coats or other tile amenities for the protection of workers from rain or cold, are not provided any more. The sick leave plan that permits 15 days of sick leave per year is not offered anymore. Moreover, travel expenses and attendant wage which were offered when the workers had to go to hospitals referred by the plantation doctor when the illness is beyond the scope of the plantation hospital is also taken out of the welfare system. In fact, this withdrawal of welfare measures is purely illegal since according to the plantation act all these welfare measures have to be provided under any circumstances.

In the totally abandoned tea estates like Koliakkanam, the resident lines are seriously damaged and unfit for living. The damaged resident lines need to be repaired by the collective effort of the workers since the residents are not in a separate building and they share walls and roofs. When I wondered why the lines are not repaired by the workers, Selvaraj, a 53 year old male worker who worked in the estate for more than thirty five years, told me that to repair the lines they not only need collective efforts, but collective money as well. But as there are families who just lead a very bare life or who have to spend for the education of their children in the first place do not have extra money to repair the lines. He further added sarcastically that those who do not want to carry out the repair give the lame excuse that they will leave the plantation soon to somewhere else and hence they do not want to waste money on the repair. This shows that, although being poor is accepted in vague terms and everyone in the estate knows that poverty is rampant in the locality; it is a serious stigma even among the poor when it points out to individuals. So the crisis has lead to fracturing of social relations and their further individualization.

I think that hesitance to repair the lines is not only because of lack of money to spend on the repair. But also because of a strong inculcation of the temporary nature of plantation life into the lifeworld of the plantation workers; it is a lived reality and a widespread strong belief among the workers. This observation came to my mind when almost all with whom I have

talked to, widely used the ‘temporary nature of plantation life’ especially in the context of the current crisis.

Mathivanan, a 50 year old *Kankani* (supervisor) in Pasumalai estate presents a prime example in this regard. He told me that he had received this job when his father Singamuthu retired from the plantation after serving as a peon in the estate office for forty years. His father could stay with him in the estate lines as he is still working in the plantation and he was provided free housing. But his son is working as a life guard in entertainment/theme Park in Cochin. He earns four thousand rupees per month which is just enough for him to support himself. So Mathivanan’s concern is that when he will retire from the plantation work, he would have to find a place outside the plantation to live as his son is not a potential worker in the plantation. Moreover, a great increase in land price in Kerala is a big concern for him. He expressed his concern and anger as he stated that even an attempt to buy a very small plot like three to four cent⁶⁷ of land in a remote place in the high ranges is not realised as more and more rich people from the plain areas come and buy acres of land to keep it as summer cottage, or to build tourist resorts, and sometimes for new plantations. So the rising real estate price further alienates the workers from their immediate vicinity. The plight of Mathivanan indicates a consciousness that the factory system in which relations were structured is no more there.

Furthermore, as discussed briefly in the first chapter, the suspension of welfare benefits during the crisis which is a state of exception is prolonged to become an ordinary state of existence. But what is worth noting here is that the suspension of welfare is much more than just denial of the workers’ privileges; This denial virtually alienates workers from a sense of belonging to the plantation since the welfare measures they enjoyed creates a sense of recognition of their roles in the plantation system. The suspension of welfare benefits means suspension of this recognition as well. Also, the contract system,⁶⁸ as a new mode of production system in the partially working plantations and also under the new co-operative set-up of the trade unions in the abandoned plantations, further undermines the value of the

⁶⁷ In India, a cent is a measure of area and equals $\frac{1}{100}$ acre (40.468 m²).

⁶⁸ Under contract system, the workers have to finish the specific tasks assigned for a fixed remuneration which they agreed upon with the contractor. Here, the contractor is obliged to provide only the remuneration, and he/she is not obliged to guarantee work for the worker in the future or to ensure the foregoing welfare measures. On the contrary, under the wage system, the workers work for 8 hours a day in order to be eligible for the minimum wage and the employer is obliged to guarantee work for the workers in the future and also the employer have to ensure the welfare measures. This contract system is a very short term contract and is assured only for the day which is different from the indenture system which is a long term contract.

worker's labour and devalue their assumed role in the plantation production. This foregoing discussion points out to an intense process of alienation from the social as well as the material conditions in which the workers' life is embedded.

Disclosed plantations, new group formation and subversion of solidarity

As seen in the last chapter, the communal solidarity is ensured by the predominance of class identity and egalitarian status among the workers, which were brought by the rigid plantation system. This is threatened by the opening of the plantations to the outside world, and thus to various interest groups. Three important changes should be stressed in this regard.

A: The first one is the intensification of the Hindutva and Christian (especially Pentecost) movements. Hindu organisations began to intensify their intervention into the civic life of the plantation communities through propagating the message of Hindu unity/nationalism as well as through introducing new brahmanic/vedic rituals and festivals which were not familiar to the Dalit Hindus in these tea estates. For instance, In the Koduakarnam estate, I have participated in a *vilakku poojai*, a ritual offering which is part of Hindu Vedic rituals and very common among mainstream (brahmanical/vedic) Hindu devotees. This ritual offering was not familiar to the plantation Dalit Hindus whose religious rituals are rooted in the ritual prescriptions of Dravidian/Tamil clan deities, which widely differ from the Vedic Hindu rituals. I have noticed that no one in the estate temple knew how to organise this ritual and one of a literate devotee had a book in his hand explaining how the ritual should be organised and what are the benefits of performing this ritual. He took in-charge of the ritual performance sidelining the local priest who is ill-informed on stages of performing this new ritual. With the weakening of the plantation structure due to the crisis, the Hindu nationalist organisations introduced many such rituals in the Hindu temples in the plantation, as part of bringing the Dalit plantation Hindus into a process of Hindu homogenisation or what could be called as sanskritisation.

Similarly, the celebration of religious festivals such as *vinayaka chathurthi*, the birth day celebration of Lord Ganesha, the elephant-headed son of brahmanical deity Shiva and Parvathi is introduced into the plantation society after the crisis began. Neither Lord Shiva nor

Lord Ganesha were popular among plantation Hindus.⁶⁹ Accordingly, this festival reinforces brahmanical Hinduism which is totally new to the plantation Hindus. This is a historical connection since in the beginning of the 20th century, the celebration of Vinyaka Chaturthi was popularised by Hindu nationalists such as Bal Ganghadhar Tilak "to bridge the gap between Brahmins and 'non-Brahmins' and find a context in which to build a new grassroots unity between them", and generate nationalistic fervour among people against the British colonial rule (Brown 1991; Ilaiah 2004). So this attempt of bridging the gap is now taken by the Hindu elites in the immediate outskirts of the tea estates particularly by the Hindu merchants in the nodal towns in the tea belt.

Moreover, certain cultural organisations with Hindu nationalist leanings namely *Ayyappa Sevak Sangh* and *Vivekananda Cultural Society* organise *bhajans* (group prayers) which are not familiar to plantation Hindus. Also, by taking advantage of the suspension of welfare measures due to the crisis, these organisations try to reinstitute these welfare measures through their organisations to attract the Hindu workers. For instance, when the medical dispensaries in the plantation were closed down, the *Ayyappa Sevak Sangh* recruited Hindu girls in the tea belt who are with high school educational and trained them in giving first-aid care and basic medical nursing to provide free basic medical service to the plantation workers, thus to allure the workers into Brahmanical Hinduism. When youth clubs began to disintegrate in the estates, *Vivekananda Cultural Society* started a free evening tuition for estate children called '*Ekal Vidyalaya*'.⁷⁰ This evening tuition always starts with a Sanskrit Hindu prayer song to habituate the plantation workers' children into a homogenised Hindu practice and to the nationalism emanates from it. This entire process of sanskritisation creates a new cultural hegemony partially replacing the non-brahmanical Hinduism that was sustained within the insulated space of plantation system before the crisis. In other words, this intrusion of Hindu nationalist organization into the disclosed plantation society reinstitute the caste hierarchy which was suspended under the rigid class order discussed in the previous chapter.

⁶⁹ This is evident from the spatial location of the temples of these deities. As mentioned in the third chapter, the temples within plantation have non-brahmanical deities as the primary deities which is different from the temples in the nodal towns which have brahmanical deities such as Shiva and Krishna as the primary deities.

⁷⁰ It was youth clubs in the plantation who used to provide free evening tuition assistance for school children in each estate.

Likewise, Christian religious groups also intensified their activities in the plantation in the context of the economic crisis. But the propagation of Christianity and consequent conversion of the plantation (Dalit Hindu) workers to Christian faiths is as old as plantation development in Kerala itself. The conversion of around 40% of the plantation workers in the belt is a demonstration of this strong Christian propagation in the belt. But what I am suggesting here is that the crisis provided a platform to intensify the missionary activities. For instance, many small buildings which were used as muster offices (In Kozhikanam estate), labour club (in Ashley estate) and crèche (in Koduakarnam estate) were converted into Pentecostal worship centres (See the picture below).



Picture 5.1: A Crèche converted to Christian prayer house

The number of gospel sessions (locally known as salvation festivals), and neighbourhood prayers have increased to a large extent after the crisis began. One of the Pentecost pastors in the belt told me that now they are trying to do 'fieldwork' in *puthuveli* (small holding lands) areas around the tea plantations since they feel that the saturation point for the conversion in the tea estates is reached. But now they are in direct conflict with the Hindu nationalist organisations. In many estates the RSS and BJP members are often unfriendly towards the Christian conversions, particularly to Pentecost mission. For example, In *Thangamalai estate*, I met few people who are vehemently opposed to the entry of Pentecost missionaries; they told

me that one Pentecost pastor who tried to convert Hindus was severely beaten and chased away from the estate.

B. The second important social transformation that is taking place in the belt under the current crisis is the threatening of collective solidarity among the workers due to factionalism created by trade unions under the new-co operative set-up of tea plucking. In closed tea estates, particularly in Pasumalai and Pambanar estates, collective solidarity is threatened by a division of workers on the basis of trade union affiliation in their workplace as mentioned above. Due to this division, antagonism among workers has increased not only in the work place, but also in the inter-personal relations in the social domain. One of my informants in Pasumalai estate told me that during hey days of the crisis, i.e., roughly between 2001-2008, the invitation to family functions such as marriages was limited to those who belonged to the same trade union. However, the exceptions were there for those with whom the workers' family had a very strong friendly relationship in the past. Even that it was also not preferred. This is contrary to the extension of invitations to all workers for family functions and popular gift exchanges among workers in the form of money (*Moi*) which were practice strongly before the crisis.

Due to the new trade union factionalism, as seen in the case of *Pasumalai*, celebrations of various social functions that include workers day, popular cultural festivals like *Onam* and *Pongal*, and national remembrance days like independence/republic days were organised on the basis of trade union membership. According to one of my informants, it went to a very unfortunate extent that the funerals in workers' families were attended only by those who are affiliated to the same trade union. It is an ethical custom in Indian culture to attend funerals of even those who were enemies to you and absence from funerals is strictly considered as a dehumanising act among the plantation workers' community. Another informant in the same estate told me that those workers' affiliated to different trade unions do not even prefer to share a smile with each other when they meet in the estate tea shop because of the existing antagonism among workers. This resulted many times in violence when the trade union/political party members of Communist Party of India (CPI) and Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) fought in public over the issue of extending support for the new company. The local trade union leaders were also encouraging this division which is evident from the fact that they were the ones who decided to divide the tea fields on the basis of trade union affiliation and who supervised the process of plucking and selling the tea leaves.

Although the antagonism eased when the new company POABS began their operation in the plantation, it still continues in mild forms.

This prioritisation of the trade union affiliation in the forefront of workers' imagination of their 'collective' is due to tremendous increase in the role of trade unions in the everyday process of plantation since they took many responsibilities which the plantation management used to carry out before the crisis. The new co-operative set up of collecting and selling of tea leaves under the supervision of trade union is a prime process in this regard. Whereas before the crisis, the trade union had only occasional interference in the plantation production process and their presence was not felt everyday contrary to the today's situation. So the breaking down of the plantation system indeed transformed the role of trade union in the plantation from their occasional champions of workers' rights (eg. bonus politics) to everyday policeman of crisis-ridden/deteriorated plantation system.

C. The third important transformation in this regard is the ruining of youth clubs in the estate. The youth clubs were acting as the primary collective and a platform for youth in the estates to carry out voluntary activities that include organising sports and arts festivals (competition) for kids and elders; and assisting workers' families in their rites of passage, marriage celebrations and funeral rituals and temple festivals in the estates. Thus the clubs played a crucial role in sustaining a communitarian nature of the plantation society. But the club activities came to a halt when the youth in the estates had to seek work outside the plantation. Most of the youth who are born and brought up in the plantation sought work outside the plantation, mostly due to the economic crisis and partly due to what I would call as the attraction towards the *non-coolie professions* which require some kind of trained expertise (for example: construction worker, taxi driver, workshop mechanic, tailor, electrician, sales boy/girl) who have higher reputation within the plantation society and are socially accepted as holding a better position than that held by plantation workers.

Suresh Kumar, a 28 years old youth left *Glenmary* estate once the crisis aggravated in 2002 seeking work in Chennai, one of the four metropolitan cities in India. He is currently working as a sales boy in Saravana Stores, the largest retail shop in south India. He was an active member of a youth club called *Bharathi Arts and Sports Club* (named after famous Tamil poet Subramania Bharathi). Both of his parents work in the estate but are unable to support themselves with the small amount of money they receive. His father is having health troubles

including semi paralysis of legs. As I talked to him, he told me that he misses the activities of the youth club and social life in the estate, but at the same time, he had to compromise his social activities for the sake of his family.

Now the space of youth clubs is being partially occupied by women self held groups in the plantations. For instance, the youth clubs used to take care of the partial expenditure of the cremation/burial and other related rituals in the locality; but now the self-help groups in the estates take care of that. These self-help groups also sometimes sponsor cultural shows and sports tournaments in the estate which were done earlier by youth clubs. The displacement of youth with women self-groups as social volunteers is yet another transformation infused by the crisis that indicates the weakening of plantation as a total institution where the external changes such as micro-credit system gain a prominent position in the new domestic/subsistence system of plantation life. Thus the crisis created many ruptures and factionalism among the workers' relation and alienates not only from the rest of the society, but also within.

Plantation management, workers and the crisis

There are three major processes initiated by the plantation management that affected the plantation workers in the context of the crisis. These are: the foregoing suspension of welfare measures, diversification of the plantation land for new business ventures, and the changes brought by the new companies that took over few closed plantations. Since I have discussed the suspension of welfare in detail, I will confine here to the discussion of the other two processes.

It is true that the economic crisis was real and caused loss to the plantation owners. But nonetheless the owners and the plantation management used the crisis as an opportunity to diversify the economic activities which were legally restricted by various laws related to the plantation status.⁷¹ Most important in this regard is to promote plantation tourism in the belt. This is carried out particularly in the partially working plantations. Since the production of tea

⁷¹ The subjection of the land under plantation for purposes other than the plantation is illegal according to the plantation act in India. These legal restrictions are being enacted primarily to guarantee jobs for the permanent workers and to ensure the plantation status through which the planters receive many privileges including exceptions from land ceiling. This diversification of land to other economic activities will decrease the plantation production and hence will reduce the number of workers in the plantation production in due time.

is confined to the fields and many of the managerial staff left the plantations, the management rented the superintendent and managers' bungalows to tourists, particularly the western tourists who might prefer it for the imperial feel/nostalgia that the structure of these bungalows evoke; they are charged highly. For instance, in Koduakarnam estate, the tourists are charged Rs.5000 per night stay in the Bungalow. This venture became highly demanding and lucrative since the plantation belt is situated within Thekkady, a famous tourist/wild life sanctuary. Furthermore, portions of estate land in many plantations (for instance, in Ashly estate) have been rented or sold to set up new tourist resorts. The estates also earned a considerable amount of money from permitting movie/album shooting. I was told by one staff member in one of my fieldwork location that, they charge Rs.30000/day for movie shooting. Also, many of the staff quarters were rented or sold to outsiders as in the case of Pasumalai estate.

Furthermore, few plantation managers took advantage of the situation to exploit the workers with more intense work especially in the estates which have been taken over by the new companies such as POABS group. Many vacancies for workers and staff were not filled in these new company estates such as Pasumalai. So the workers currently available had to do additional work. One field staff in Pasumalai estate told me that he is working three times of the amount of the work he used to do before the crisis, since the new company denied work for two of his assistance. The fieldworkers are exploited through foregoing contract system. Also, the strategy of employing more temporary workers who live in the plantation and daily wage workers from outside the plantation is carried out in order to cut the social cost of production (since these temporary and outside workers need not be given any welfare benefits) and to maintain the alienated status of labour in the plantation production. These new companies are called 'new generation companies' that have many young trained experts in business management who act on their will and have more freedom contrary to old companies that carry out duties based on strict norms and rules. This new kind of organisational structure and contract system is borrowed from the multinational companies' sub-contract system (cf. Castells 1996).

It is crucial to understand that the economic crisis in the tea plantation was relatively short-lived and official statistics indicate that it had passed by mid-2008.⁷² However, it was

⁷² According to a statistics of Indian Tea Board, the average tea production in south India increased to 390.28 million Kgs in 2008 from 381.87 million Kgs and the price at auction increased to Rs. 66.27/kg in 2008 from

effectively sustained as a *raison d'être* for a re-organization of the conditions of plantation life. As mentioned above, the workers were not informed of the return to more favourable market conditions for tea and were effectively maintained in the circumstances of the initial crisis. Thus the welfare benefits suspended during the crisis have not been re-instituted. The workers today, although they have discontent over the cut in welfare measures and delayed wages, do not resist these cuts as they believe that the economic crisis is not over yet, and they also fear the closure of estates. This is a situation when a state of exception is prolonged to an ordinary state of existence (Agamben 1998),⁷³ where the crisis continue to be an imagined specter under which the plantation workers continue to experience their life today.

Rs. 49.70/Kg (<http://www.teaboard.gov.in/pdf/stat/Price07.pdf> . Furthermore, the average price of Indian tea in the export markets, increased during the year to Rs 136.64 a kg from Rs 117.81 a kg in 2008, and In 2009, South Indian tea-producing states - Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka - recorded an yield of 244.1 million kg, down from 246.8 million kg in 2008 (<http://www.commodityonline.com/news/India-tea-output-dips-exports-up-by-37-percent-25490-3-1.html>)

⁷³ According to Agamben, laws related to civic rights suspended for a prolonged period under a state of exception such as war will be perpetuated to become an 'ordinary' state of existence through which the contemporary state partially reproduce its sovereign power (Agamben 1998).

CHAPTER SIX

CRITIQUE AND CONCLUSION

From class order to caste hierarchy

The organising principle of the plantation society emphasizes its structuring in terms of Class rather than Class as practiced in village India (Chapter 4). The suspension of caste in its rigid form insulated and protected the workers from the kind of caste discrimination that describes the degradation and social humiliation their relatives who remained in Tamil Nadu or their Dalit counterparts in Kerala's society (outside the plantation) face today. I did not mean that the incorporation of these Tamil Dalits into the plantation system was a boon to them. However the relative suspension of the ritually-legitimated hierarchical caste relations was an unintended consequence of the insulated nature of the plantation and its strict industrial order.

But I stress here that the ideology of caste has been an important legitimizing element for the creation of a particular system of class oppression related to the plantation economy and its basis in indentured labour.⁷⁴ In the early days of the plantation development, the structures of ritually-legitimated orders of submission that are present in village realities were engaged to the building of the plantation economy. Thus outcastes were employed in menial work whereas those conceptualized as being from higher castes were given higher status jobs and often placed in supervisory positions (Evans 1995, p 168).

This employment of caste order was in fact a reinvention of the colonial officials where they reconceived the idea of the caste to fit with the class order in a stratificational sense – caste was treated as stratified system of occupational category (see Chapter 2). However, as the socio-industrial order of the plantations evolved historically into a total institutional system, social relations mediated through the ideas of caste became more and more irrelevant; class rather than caste became the dominant principle for the ordering of social relations both at work and in everyday communal life (see Chapter 4). A similarity can be seen in my analysis here with that of Epstein and others in the Manchester School for social relations in the Copper belt towns of Zambia. There the colonial authorities conceived of migrant workers as

⁷⁴ As Omvedt (1980) argues a pre-capitalist feudal agrarian order formed the basis of a modern capitalist structure. Ann Stoler presents a similar case of Sumatra's plantation belt where capitalist production was built on the foundation of non-capitalist peasant orders (Stoler 1985).

essentially tribal people and administered them accordingly. But tribal authority (and the relations of kinship upon which it was based in rural areas) was realized by the workers as irrelevant to their urban industrial context. They actively rejected modes of control based on tribalist interpretations of colonial authorities and developed their own institutions that were class-based and entirely relevant to the industrial orders in which the migrant workers found themselves (Mitchell 1956; Epstein 1958).

On the other hand, the economic crisis that subverted the strict class order and the insulated nature of the plantation forced the workers to seek work outside the plantation in their ancestors' homeland that is in Tamil Nadu and the immediate periphery of the plantation, Kerala (see chapter five). As further evident from the chapter five, the workers who went to work in Tamil Nadu had to conceal their caste identity in order to survive even in the urban areas of Tamil Nadu. Similarly, those who went back to their ancestral villages in the rural parts of Tamil Nadu had to re-habituate themselves to the caste order of the village and constrained their social relations to those who belonged to their caste, as explicated through the life of Kannan who became active in the caste organisation in his ancestral village, Nagaram near Trichy.

Furthermore, the inferior status attributed to Tamil identity in Kerala society stigmatised the workers who sought work in the mainstream Kerala society outside the plantation. As I mentioned in the chapter one, this inferior and dehumanising construction of the word *pandi* has caste connotation since the word is only used in reference to Tamil to low-caste Tamils and never, for example, to Tamil Brahmins in Kerala. The combined social stigma attached to *tamilness* and *Dalitness* in Kerala added to the feelings of alienation as well as material suffering experienced by the plantation workers during the crisis. This exposure of the plantation workers to the outside society where their multiple identities are dehumanised is appalling but unnoticed tragedy of the crisis.

Also, as discussed in the fourth and fifth chapters, the egalitarian nature and collective consciousness/solidarity that was a feature of the plantation workers' lives was destroyed during the crisis. New forms of social organization coming from outside – such as the Pentecostal and Hindutva missions – took advantage of the distress and fragmentation that occurred. It is important to mention here that the exposure of the workers to processes of religious sanskritization through Hindu nationalist activity (Hindutva) paradoxically re-

engaged dimensions of a religiously supported hierarchy in the organization of everyday life. This means that the attraction of the workers to sanskritized Hindu practices brought them within a larger social and political order that in effect subordinated them within caste hierarchical ideas that had been suspended during the time when the plantation factory system was dominant. As a result the class order of the plantation system was restructured in such a way that caste re-assumed a significance that had largely been lost or at least suspended. That is the outcaste status of the plantation workers which had been rendered relatively irrelevant in the day to day lives of the workers within the plantations became re-asserted in the course of the crisis. Thus the crisis by disclosing the plantation structure created ruptures within and outside the plantation society that in turn created room for further alienation of the plantation workers.

Plantation workers and their 'net of authorities'

It was substantiated in the preceding chapters that the net of authorities in the plantation belt was crucial in sustaining the plantation system through maintaining the rigid plantation order, and that they have vital role in maintaining the marginal position of the workers, both before and through the crisis period. The role of these authorities in perpetuating the workers' marginal position is discussed here by pointing out to the current situation of plantation management, trade unions and State in relation to the workers.

Plantation management and the social reproduction of the alienated labour

As discussed in the fifth chapter, the planters used the crisis as an excuse to alter the planter-worker relationship to their advantage. The cutting of working days, suspension of welfare benefits, and other infrastructural facilities in the name of the crisis paralysed workers' life in the plantation. This is similar to the situation of Sumatra's plantation belt, as explained by Ann Stoler (1985); the Great Depression allowed companies to extract their profit on the basis of a more modernised mode of exploitation, with a strong focus on eliminating waste labour force, more efficient mechanisation and increase in labour's productivity (pp. 88-89).

The costs of the restructuring of the plantation economy were largely borne by the workers. The indebtedness to which they were already prone (because of already low wages, inflation etc.) was intensified because of delays in receiving their payment. These delays became a device whereby the planters were able to cover the costs of their restructuring both of

production and work. When the workers were eventually paid they have usually incurred such debt from accumulating interest that the wages they receive would barely meet the demands of debt repayment. Thus the workers were forced into a debt cycle due to the back payments of their wages, which, as evident in many cases (for instance, in the tea plantations in Assam), is a common issue among all tea plantation workers in India.

The planters claim that the plantation labour act is an outdated law which should be updated with new amendment that reflect the practical concerns of the planters. Moreover, they are strongly lobbying for the State to share the social cost of production and exemption from the minimum wage act (The Hindu Business Line Sept. 10, 2008). In the 116th annual conference of UPASI (United Planters Association of South India) held at Coonoor, then President Mr. D.P. Maheshwari in his presidential speech, called for a strong intervention from the planters in urging the State to share the social cost of production and stated that certain outmoded legislations such as the plantation labour act and minimum wage act should be withdrawn because they place many disabilities on the competitiveness of plantation products in the international and domestic markets (Planters' Chronicle September 2009). This aspiration of planters to make the government take responsibility for the cost of the workers' welfare is thus internal to a broader lobbying of new generation multinational corporations to urge the state to ensure all the infrastructural facilities required for flexible capitalist investment/production.

Also, many aspects of employer-worker relation in new production set-ups such as special economic zones in new digital economy are being replicated into the plantation production relations. The case of deunionisation, contract system of labour, and changing concept of decent labour are few examples in this regard. While plantations were exempted from the land redistribution and land ceiling, the planters were obliged to provide welfare measures in return of that exemption. In fact, the plantation labour act was passed during the heydays of the trade union movement in India which, the planters think, could be amended today as part of larger economic reforms through strong political lobbying.

Furthermore, as mentioned in the first chapter, statistics from Indian Tea Board⁷⁵ show that the Indian tea markets have recovered from the crisis now. But the workers are ill-informed

⁷⁵ http://www.teaboard.gov.in/inner2.asp?param_link_id=410

on the status of the crisis and they still consider themselves to be in a condition of crisis, in which indeed they are. The plantation owners actively encourage such a feeling using the very idea of a crisis, or the threat of market downturns, as an ideological means for continuing to transform the production and social environment of the plantations in their favour. This encouragement is also enacted through the act of negating the welfares and generating an uncertainty over monthly distribution of wages so that the workers would feel that the crisis is still active. Because, for workers, the signs of normal plantation life such as the services of estate hospitals and distribution of welfare measures and perks is what points to the end of the crisis. But this does not happen in the plantation although the price for tea is back to normal. So the use of cutting down of welfare measures as an end in itself becomes a means that legitimise the cutting down of welfare measures. Thus, the continuing activation of the economic crisis through these measures gently forces the workers to keep on consuming the economic crisis which help the planters to weed out any additional expenditure additional to the mere social reproduction of labour.

Furthermore, in addition to their preference for temporary and contract workers discussed above, the planters now focus on complete mechanisation of the production process so that they will just need to work with minimum workers. Particularly, the ongoing replacement of workers with machines in tea plucking would replace a significant portion of workforce. These measures point out to the further alienation of the workers from the plantation system itself. Whereas the planters need human labour anyhow to continue with the plantation production, the shortage of labour force perpetuated by the current exodus of part of Tamil plantation workers to various unorganised sectors seems to be replaced by workers from eastern India particularly from the states of Bihar, Orissa and West Bengal.⁷⁶ This replacement of Tamil/Malayalam speaking labour is already carried out in the rubber plantation in the adjoining areas (like Mundakayam) of Peermade tea belt where the workers are replaced by cheaper workers from eastern India. The planters' interest in recruiting this extremely low cost labour would undercut the strength of the protests from the current Tamil workers.

The replacement of part of Tamil plantation workers with the (cheaper) labourers from eastern India is similar to that of other plantations in the world, where the replacement of earlier

⁷⁶ This migration have an international dimension as I was told (by an Orissa labourer in a rubber estate) that there are workers from Bangladesh who claim to be from the Indian state of West Bengal engaged in manual labour in various parts of Kerala.

workers with the new ones creates an ethnic division of labour (Martinez 2007) and could be source of ethnic antagonism (Jayawardane 1963; Mintz 1989). As Martinez (2007, pp. 22-23) writing of Dominican plantations in the Dominican Republic states:

“West Indians replaced Dominicans in the cane fields in the 1880s and 1890s, just as employers switched from paying cutters by the task to ganged day labor. Haitians took the West Indians’ place in the 1930s in the 1930s, as gang labor gave way to piece-rate wages. Each of these shifts reduced the workers’ bargaining power. Resentment about these upheavals has been directed away from company management by granting jobs higher up the company job ladder to a few established workers, deporting many others, and letting the remainder find their way towards jobs in port cities. Plantation managers have thus not only circumvented resistance by replacing old laborers with new ones but have promoted ethnic divisions as a strategy of labor control.”

But in the case of Peermade tea belt, the workers will not be replaced by force due to the protection provided to the workers by rigid labour laws. Rather, the planters may not recruit new *permanent workers* and would prefer to increase the temporary workforce through accommodating the foregoing workers from Eastern India probably on contract basis so that the planters need not to provide the welfare benefits given to the permanent workers.

Trade unionism and its ethnic boundary: a comparative perspective

Trade unions who used to be the interlocutors between workers and planters became involved in the structuring of new patterns of control and work in the context of the crisis rather than unifying the workers to radically resist the misfortune. Thus they became agencies in social and political fragmentation of the workers, as well as adding to their economic distress. Since the trade unions are led by the Malayalam-speaking group, they are seen by the workers to have not pushed their interests sufficiently. While this may indeed be the case, the Peermade plantation workers have been relatively better served than, for example, workers in other plantations elsewhere in India. But the key concern here is that the workers are not permitted their own representatives and consequently relegated to the marginal position in the plantation politics.

As Anna Tsing states in the Indonesian context, the local leaders are ambitious enough to tell the government that they represent the community and their neighbours that they represent the State (1993, p72; referred in Blom Hansen et al. ed. 2001, p26). While this ambiguous and intercalary role of trade union leaders as agents in between the government and workers is almost a universal phenomenon, what is noteworthy in the context of Peermade tea belt is that trade union leaders are neither plantation workers nor Tamils exacerbates tensions and suspicion.

The trade union movement as a class movement never strongly addressed the issue of Caste, which is very central to the Dalit workers' alienation. There is a disparity between how their life identity is addressed largely which is as Dalits and how the same is addressed locally, that is as 'Tamil plantation workers' where their Dalit identity is not revealed. One of the popular Dalit movements, Kerala Harijan Federation (KHP) which later became Indian Dalit Federation (IDF) held its first meeting in Glenmary estate by organising the minority Malayalam speaking Dalit (mostly those of Pulaya caste) workers in 1986. But the movement also failed to inculcate Dalit consciousness among the Tamil Dalit plantation workers. The failure of this inclusiveness, as expressed by the current State President of IDF to me, is due to the strong opposition and threat coming from other political parties/trade unions who already institutionalised the monopoly of representing the plantation workers. Furthermore, the class order of the plantation situation emphasized the need for trade union movement where the issue of Dalit identity was overshadowed by the lower class identity. This is also an important reason for relative failure of Dalit movements in the plantation.

Having trade union as a safety valve, the planters were indeed successful in controlling the work force. As mentioned in the third chapter, the ethnic composition of trade union leadership is primarily of non-Dalit Malayalam speaking people who could use the caste hierarchy in their favour to keep the plantation workers under control, in spite of repeated 'politics of bonus' as described in the fourth chapter. This is contrary to the case of workers in Tamil Nadu plantations (particularly in plantations in Tirunelveli and Udagamandalam) where the workers' discontent with major trade union wings of Indian National Congress and Communist parties (Viswanathan 1999) led to the growth of trade union wings of Dalit political parties especially in the last decade. No wonder, most of the workers belonging to Dalit communities, are inclined towards Thozhilalar Viduthalai Munnani of the Dalit Panthers of India (that represents Parayar caste) and Puthiya Tamizhakam (that represents Pallar caste).

In India, where the electoral politics is rooted in caste and the granting of federal sovereignty is based on language, the Dalit plantation workers in Kerala have multiple disabilities in this regard to break their marginal position. I am not suggesting here that the situation of plantation workers in Tamil Nadu is better than their Kerala counterparts just because the former live within their larger cultural boundary. Instead, my argument is that the plantation workers in Tamil Nadu, being situated within their own cultural boundary on the one hand and being part of recently intensified Dalit movements that has state wide potency and political significance on the other, are able to represent themselves and raise their concerns through their cultural membership as Dalits. This is evident from the fact that the plantation workers in Tamil Nadu could frequently organise and agitate for their rights under Dalit movements. For instance, when 17 plantation workers from Manjulai tea estate in Tirunelveli district in Tamil Nadu were killed in police firing in one of their demonstration against the back payment of wages (which came to be called Tirunelveli massacre) on July 23, 1999, a strong condemnation of the event were collectively organised only by Dalit political parties in Tamil Nadu, with the sole exception of CPI (M) which supported the the Dalit parties (ibid). In contrary, the plantation workers in Kerala are situated within an alien socio-cultural boundary and also out of Dalit movement/discourse in Kerala. This situatedness in an alien socio-cultural boundary is a primary concern for Tamil plantation workers in Kerala, but more importantly to the Tamil plantation workers in Sri Lanka⁷⁷ and Malaysia whose situation is more vulnerable than their counterparts in Tamil Nadu and Kerala.⁷⁸

State as an alienating and legitimising (abstract) entity

As examined in the first and second chapters, the Tamil plantation workers situated themselves in an alien state system since the formation of post-colonial state in 1956. As mentioned above, the division of federal units in India was based on linguistic provinces as a strategy to contain ethnic conflict and to build a nation state (Chadda 2002). Since Malayalam was the official language in Kerala and the process of bureaucratic institutionalisation was based on Malayali culture, the Tamil plantation workers were not represented in the state process where they were conceived as migrant labour force only. This alienation and non-representation is evident through the hardships the workers faced in receiving the permanent

⁷⁷ http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/4260898.stm (Sri Lanka's forgotten Tea workers)

⁷⁸ For studies on Tamil tea plantation workers in Malaysia and Sri Lanka, see Hollup 1994; Kurian 1982; Daniel 1996; Peebles 2001; Bunnel 2004.

resident status/certification as mentioned in the second chapter. Furthermore, the continuation of this hardship to receive permanent resident certification and further alienation from state in recent years is pointed in the fourth chapter. The continuing anthropological/genealogical investigation of government is a prime example in this regard.⁷⁹ So the Tamil identity often became a disability in their relation to the State. The lack of plantation workers' identification (or imagination) of State as part of themselves and the alienation of State from these workers' life world is fundamental to the social reproduction of their marginality under the current crisis and beyond.

While the foregoing process of post-colonial state formation itself alienates the workers from the State, the alienation and the deprived situation of the workers is legitimised through various practices of state. The workers, particularly after the crisis began, depend on State-sponsored welfares such as government schools/hospitals/ration-shops/caste-cased reservations which discipline the workers and submit them into the State authority which are well explored in the writings of Michel Foucault, particularly in his *Madness and civilizations* (Foucault 1973). This dependency and further submission to the state sovereignty and its legal framework is mediated and further disciplined by the state representatives at the local level, which is none other than the trade unions leaders in the plantation belt. So the role of state welfare measures and the mediation of trade union in the plantations concede the workers to their deprived conditions during the crisis.

Furthermore, the workers' deprived condition partially stems from their landlessness and it is the state which is responsible for legitimising and guaranteeing the ownership of land through the constitutionally-ratified right to private property as evident in the case of native planters' land accumulation discussed in the second chapter. Thus, the State in its abstract form is authorised to legitimise, among others, whatever socioeconomic condition that exists in a given time. In consequence, as a constituent of workers' identity (Jayawardane 1963), State is the most powerful net of authority with regard to the workers as it naturalises the socioeconomic condition in what the workers call as *Thalavithi* (Destiny).

⁷⁹ When the Tamil plantation workers apply for a resident certificate to be submitted for higher education or for job applications, they are often subjected to what is officially called as the 'Anthropological/Genealogical Investigation' to know whether the particular Tamil worker is entitled for a permanent resident certificate or not. The delay in the investigation sometimes causes the children of these plantation workers to lose various opportunities. One of my informants lost an opportunity to get admission for a higher studies course in elementary teacher training due to the delay in the anthropological investigation.

As I observed from the field, for the plantation workers, state, as one of net of authorities, is an abstract and ambiguous entity revealed through electoral politics and trade unions for everyday revelation on the one hand and through government's decentralised bureaucratic institutions (Gupta 1995) such as local administrative offices (for welfare provisions and citizenship status) and police stations (for social order and criminal surveillance) on the other. In contrary to ordinary Indian villages where the local bureaucracy is the everyday imagination of State (ibid), it is the trade unions who incarnate the State in the everyday life of the plantation society. Furthermore, as examined in the fourth chapter, it is through the trade union that the workers have access to the bureaucratic institutions of the state.

The appearance of State as an abstract entity for the plantation workers is primarily because of the fact that the State was relatively shielded from the day to day experience of the plantation system where the trade union mediated the state. Moreover, the workers are not embodied in the State apparatuses through their participation in local administration, policing, trade unions or political party leaderships. There are very few exceptions to this general claim as scanty numbers of descendents of plantation workers found work in the government bureaucratic institutions. Having someone from the same ethnic background as active part of various state apparatus directly or indirectly creates a sense of belonging to the State and also increases the faith in the State. In fact, India is known for its identity politics in this regard where every political party try to woo caste groups through creating a space for symbolic representation of communities they aspire to integrate into their movement. In sum, the state is an abstract entity which alienates the workers through the very nature of its formation and it legitimise the alienation and the deprived condition of the workers through its welfare and disciplining processes mediated by the trade union and occasionally by state bureaucracy.

Plantation workers and dalit labour force in the informal economy

Dalit workers form the largest group among workers in unorganised sectors in India (Thorat et al, 2005; Harris-White 2003). For instance, most of the migrated workforce in the informal economy of Kerala is from Dalit communities of eastern India (particularly from Bihar, Orissa, and West Bengal) and southern India (particularly Tamil and Telugu speaking people). The plantation workers' search for new means of subsistence in the unorganized sectors which is discussed in the fifth chapter shows that they are becoming part of a larger pool of this Dalit community who form most of the labour force in unorganized and informal

sectors. As seen further in the same chapter, the plantation workers, after the crisis, are mostly engaged in construction, retail market, textile factories and head-loading where most of the workforce is migrated/commuting Dalit labourers.

This migrant Dalit labour force in the informal economy is de-unionised and marginalised population who are rooted out of their land to work elsewhere. Although they frequently keep contact with their native place, nonetheless they are alienated in the society where they work, for example, east Indians in Kerala. Accordingly, the plantation workers' merging with these migrant communities as in the case of Tirupur textile industry discussed in the fifth chapter, show that they end up as workers without identity as a continuation of their ancestors who were in the similar situation in the initial years of plantation development. The crisis and the consequent opening up of the plantation system thus pushed them into the oscillation of the Dalit labour force, and further perpetuated their marginality in Indian society.

Concluding remarks: the social reproduction of alienation

The plantation workers expresses in the first place the dimensions of the world economy simply for being the wage labourers of an exporting crop produced in a capitalist enclave/periphery. It should be noted that the recent economic crisis in Indian tea industry is primarily ascribed to the developments in the world tea market.⁸⁰ So the life of the plantation workers was very sensitive to the dynamics of capitalist market and understanding the plantation workers' life in this regard throws light into new manifestations of production relations under capitalist plantation system. The paradox is, as appeared in the case of Peermade tea belt, that the workers' integration into the market economy is sustained by their alienation (in other words exclusion) from the immediate periphery. That alienation further reinforces their integration, but only as unfree labourers who sell their labour for a meagre income that socially reproduce the plantation system. But after the crisis, their work locations multiplied, but their alienation and the social reproduction of their condition remained same.

The dilemma of the plantation workers is that they are always in a crossroad. They are neither a tribal community who confines their larger social interaction within their settlement nor an industrial working class who is part of socialized population in the mainstream society and

⁸⁰ It was the plantations whose market is abroad (export oriented) which were most affected by the crisis, and in contrary, those plantations who primarily trade their tea in the domestic market were least affected.

accustomed to modernity. The plantation workers are thus in between the tribal life and urban lower-class life. Their situation is similar to their Caribbean counterparts who are described by Mintz (1989) as a community which is coerced into modernity but does not counted as modern in the anthropological imagination. Under this modernity, the plantation workers were incorporated into a complete monetary system, as a population sustain on secured but low monthly distributed daily wages. So when the economic crisis caused the suspension of their wage earning, they had no resources or possessions to depend upon to survive.

The landlessness of the plantation workers which is historically produced and now accelerated by tremendous increase in land price further alienates (dispossesses in Harvey's terms) and reproduces them in the same marginal condition. As David Harvey (2003) observes, the privatization of the land is closely associated with creating a landless labour community, which is an inherent process of capital accumulation through continuous dispossession. Thus the social displacement of the poor from urban and developed fertile plains in Kerala facilitated by considerable increase in the cost of living,⁸¹ extraordinary increases in the price of land, and lavish consumption patterns on the one side and the aforesaid impoverishing pattern of plantation life on the other side constraint workers from moving either way. The only option left is to go back to their ancestral land of Tamil Nadu; those plantation workers who retained close association/ties with their ancestral place were the one who left the plantation during the crisis. However, those who went to cities like the aforesaid retail market industry in Chennai and textile industry in Tiruppur were highly exploited. Most often these people have to conceal their caste identity in order to find or continue with the work in the cities. This is where the plantation workers in Peermade tea belt stand when their life is reconfigured due to the economic crisis and they are dumped into a situation of limbo.

There is a strong barrier for workers' to understand the status of the crisis due to spatial and social alienation discussed in the third and fourth chapters. They do not know what is happening with the complicated and highly sophisticated norms of international trading and the technical jargons/statistics and claimed logics associated with it. Moreover, none of the movements, political or trade unions, tried to explain the workers about the nook and corner of the issue. The workers only know that the plantations they inhabit does not yield profit for

⁸¹ The Consumer Price Index (CPI) of Department of Economics and Statistics of the Government of Kerala shows tremendous increase in cost of living in Kerala in last few years (cf. http://www.kerala.gov.in/services/consu_index.htm)

the planters, and therefore they are not paid their wages. So they do not seem to think in terms of resistance against the larger economic ideals or their embodied institutions like multinational corporations and an oligarchic-state, rather they resist against their misfortune.

The primary concern of this thesis was how alienation of Tamil plantation workers, as defined in the first chapter, is socially reproduced in the context of the crisis, particularly as a historical continuity. Rather than providing abstract reasons for their alienated/marginal position or placing them vaguely as part of the underclass in India, I have closely observed the details of the process of the production of their alienation. As evident throughout the thesis their alienated position today is underpinned in exposure of workers to the caste ridden outside society; transformation in the role of plantation management, trade unions and State in their relation to the workers; and, workers' reintegration into larger Dalit migrant workforce outside the plantation system.

Under all these transformations, their life world today is only left with their loneliness in finding a way to survive. That is to say, their only *karma* today is to feel the alienation.

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Malayala Manorama (Malayalam)

Mathrubhumi (Malayalam)