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State Life: Land, Welfare and Management of the Landless in Kerala, India

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ABSTRACT

The pressing need to manage the spiralling number of landless people around the world has compelled several states to experiment with scattered land distribution programmes in combination with welfare transfers, instead of comprehensive land reform. This article examines the chasm between land demands and state responses in such contexts. Focusing on the Aralam resettlement site for the landless Adivasis in Kerala, India, it argues that management of the landless could take the form of 'state life' — a life envisaged by the state rather than the life the people wish to lead. Three interlinked processes are shown to shape state life in Kerala: the reduction of land to welfare, amplified welfare transfers and the mobilization of assumptions about the target population. State life enables states to extinguish simmering land struggles in the short term, but ultimately it reproduces landlessness.

INTRODUCTION

'They put us here to watch the animals', said Bindu,[1] a resident of the Aralam resettlement site. The author is grateful to the five anonymous reviewers at *Development and Change* whose

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[1] Interview with Bindu, Aralam, Kerala, 7 December 2017.

for Adivasis in the Indian State of Kerala.[2] Over the last three decades, the landless Adivasis here have been demanding land through organized as well as scattered struggles. Resettlement sites such as Aralam were initiated under pressure from these movements. However, a large number of land recipients have abandoned the plots allotted to them to return to landlessness. Others, such as Bindu, are struggling to hold on to the land received. This article explores why this happened and brings out the tension between demands for land and responses by the welfare state in contexts where land struggles evoke specific forms of biopolitics.

The burgeoning number of people expelled from their land have spurred states around the world to adopt several 'make live' strategies that seek to sustain lives (Li, 2010a). These strategies have become urgent as landless people find the prospect of gaining secure employment extremely dispiriting. Kerala's Adivasis are a case in point. Over the course of history, since the arrival of settlers in the 15th century, they lost access to land and forests. The resultant precariousness of their existence was compounded by livelihood expulsions in neoliberal times, precipitating land struggles (these expulsions are detailed below). Through the case of Aralam, this article illustrates how their demand for substantive social and political control over land is met with scattered distribution of land that merely helps day-to-day survival. They are 'made live' through social transfers that exceed the usual cache of welfare programmes provided to the Adivasis.[3] The resolution of the Adivasi land question is achieved through the creation of what I call 'state life' — the life that the state imagines for the people rather than the life they wish to lead.

This article shows that state life in Kerala is shaped by three processes: the reduction of land to welfare, amplified welfare transfers and the mobilization of assumptions about the target population. It argues that state life is a mechanism the state uses to put out simmering land struggles. To locate the analytical utility of state life, I briefly refer to the discussions on 'surplus populations' that are regaining scholarly attention (see, for example, Azeri, 2019;

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[2] The term 'Adivasi' (literally, first inhabitant) is used by many communities in India with political appeal to assert their rights over their territories. Several of them fall in the administrative category of Scheduled Tribes. For an account of the overlaps and divergences between the terms Adivasi, tribe and Indigenous peoples, see Radhakrishna (2016). This article uses 'State' to refer to the subnational state in India and 'the state' to refer to the theoretical and institutional apparatus of governance. The term 'government' is used to refer to the specific regimes that come to power through elections.

[3] 'Make live' strategies refer to state-sponsored programmes used for sustaining lives. Social transfers and welfare transfers are used interchangeably in this article.

Benanav, 2014; Ceruti, 2010; Neilson and Stubbs, 2011; Rajaram, 2018). State life can help us understand how states around the world manage growing surplus populations to prevent uprisings. Surplus populations refer to those whose labour is no longer needed by the requirements of capital in a given place and time (Marx, 1867/1990). For many scholars, surplus populations are still a part of capitalism, in that they form a reserve army of labour and therefore a requirement for capitalist accumulation (Bernards and Soederberg, 2021; Breman, 2019). For other scholars, they have become irrelevant to the contemporary pathways of capitalism (Ferguson, 2006; Li, 2017). As Bernards and Soederberg (2021) argue, surplus populations must be understood contextually, examining their specific location in capitalist relations.

The fieldwork conducted for this study shows that the landless Adivasis of Kerala constitute an 'in-between' surplus population. On the one hand, they are facing expulsions from multiple livelihood sectors, thereby becoming increasingly irrelevant to Kerala's growth path. On the other hand, they continue to be linked to capitalist circuits through rent, debt, migration and participation in welfare programmes. On resettlement sites, they are not able to pursue sustainable livelihoods, with the result that they are forced to search for wage labour, which is extremely hard to come by.

This article draws on 11 months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2017 and 2018 and additional fieldwork in 2022. The fieldwork was conducted primarily at two sites — Aralam in Kannur district and various locations in Wayanad district. Wayanad has the largest Adivasi population in Kerala. The article focuses on the Paniyas, the largest Adivasi community in the State. Data were collected through observation, interviews with Adivasi men and women (roughly in equal numbers), state officials, activists and former non-Adivasi workers of Aralam Farm, and participation in social movement rallies. Data were also collected through Right to Information requests and from the archives of the Kerala Legislative Assembly and Malayalam newspapers. All names have been anonymized.

ADIVASIS AND THE KERALA STATE

The state's responses to Adivasi claims for land have come about in a context of slow but persistent loss of control over land and forests over time. This section outlines this context, beginning with an examination of the multiple forms of marginalization that they face, including landlessness. This is followed by an exploration of the land struggles that were

organized in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Next, the specific context in which the Aralam project came about is described.

Adivasi Landlessness

Starting in the 15th century, the landless Adivasis of Kerala, including the Paniyas, lost access to land and forests through waves of settlement of more affluent communities in the hills of Western Ghats. They now live in around 5,000 cramped settlements, locally known as 'colonies', which were formed over several decades from the 1930s onwards. The land reform implemented in the 1970s[4] consisted of three elements: redistribution of ceiling-surplus land, conferral of ownership rights to tenants and distribution of around 10 cents (a cent is a hundredth of an acre) of *kutikidappu bhoomi* (housing plots) to landless agricultural labourers. A rich literature has documented how land reform prioritized the second element, leading to the neglect of agricultural labourers, including the landless Adivasis (Dasgupta, 2017; Herring, 1980, 1983; Oommen, 1993; Radhakrishnan, 1980; Scaria, 2010). Many Adivasis lived in forests or frontiers, which made them difficult to reach and led to their exclusion from the first and third elements of the reform. Moreover, the state exempted plantations from the purview of land ceilings, citing their importance to the economy (Radhakrishnan, 1981). Ceiling-surplus plantation land could have been used for redistribution, thus its exemption allowed Adivasi landlessness to continue unabated.

Today, poverty, unemployment and hunger are common in Adivasi settlements. Their precarious existence was exacerbated by starvation deaths following the liberalization of the Indian economy and the consequent agrarian crisis in the early 1990s. Whilst the Adivasis face increasing irrelevance to Kerala's growth path, they are also being expelled from multiple livelihood sources. The case of the Paniyas is the perfect illustration of such marginalization. The agrarian crisis took away farm labour, their mainstay. The booming construction sector provided them with wage labour until recently, but they are now being replaced by cheaper migrant labour from central and eastern India. The National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS), adopted in 2006, hardly provides the stipulated 100 days of work and NREGS wages are irregular and lower than market rates.

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[4] The first land reform legislation was enacted by a government led by the undivided Communist Party of India (CPI) in 1957, soon after the formation of the State of Kerala. The legislation went through several amendments and was finally implemented in 1970 by a government led by the divided CPI and consisting of the breakaway Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPI(M), among others.

Although Adivasis have access to Kerala's labour unions in principle, the latter have mostly turned a blind eye to their precariousness. My Paniya interlocutors emphasized that even if they settled for lower wages, migrant labour would be preferred because they are seen as more pliable, without any union participation. Further, the Paniyas and other landless Adivasi communities rarely gain access to reserved jobs as these mostly go to the few landowning communities that also fall in the Scheduled Tribe category.[5] The landless Adivasis have also not gained access to the tourism industry or the migratory routes to the Persian Gulf, which is based on social capital. The Paniyas are also being expelled from the one sector that they migrated to for work — the ginger farms of the neighbouring State of Karnataka set up by affluent farmers from Kerala — through their replacement with cheaper, more flexible local labour. Despite their increasing irrelevance, however, the Paniyas remain embedded in capitalist relations through their continuing dependence on any available wage work, rendering them an 'in-between' surplus population. This applies especially to those living in the resettlement sites, where the inability to form a relationship with land forces them to look for wage labour outside, which is scarce.

Following the land reform of the 1970s, Adivasi citizens in Kerala have been the target of three key land-related laws: the 1974 Private Forests (Vesting and Assignment) Act; the 1975 Scheduled Tribes (Restriction of Transfer of Lands and Restoration of Alienated Lands) Act; and the 1999 Restriction on Transfer by and Restoration of Lands to Scheduled Tribes Act.[6] The 1974 Act allowed the distribution of forestland previously held by private parties to landless agricultural labourers and Scheduled Tribes. A total of 23,000 hectares were identified for distribution, but the implementation was haphazard. Land was distributed without post-resettlement support — a pattern that would be repeated later in several resettlement sites, including in Aralam. Abandonment of plots has been widely common in these projects.

Meanwhile, the 1975 Act promised to restore land that had been alienated from the Adivasis from 1 January 1960. This radical legislation could have benefitted a large number of Adivasis, but the law was never implemented due to pressure from settlers. Instead, it was repealed and replaced with the 1999 Act which brought about two key changes. It exempted alienated lands that were less than five acres from the purview of restoration, and it promised

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[5] Reservation refers to the earmarking of seats in elections, public jobs and public institutions of higher education for certain groups of communities.
[6] The first two were enacted under a government led by the CPI and the third under a government led by the CPI(M).

a minimum of one acre and a maximum of five acres of alternative land to those who had less than an acre (Parmar, 2018). While the latter provision allowed landless Paniyas to be considered for land distribution, it excluded Adivasi households that had lost less than five acres. In 2010, the law was challenged in the Supreme Court, which upheld it and directed the government to hasten land distribution. Adivasi movements have by and large accepted this new paradigm of alternative land. Despite the court order, land distribution continues to be lethargic.

Struggle for Control over Land

In the early 1990s, several malnutrition deaths in the Adivasi settlements made it clear that welfare, particularly publicly provided food and healthcare, ensured limited survival. In 2001, C.K. Janu, from the landless Adiya community, led the Adivasis to Thiruvananthapuram, the State capital, to demand land. The participants erected shacks, giving the struggle the name 'Kudilketti Samaram' ('Struggle by Erecting Shacks'). It lasted for about two months and resulted in the founding of the Adivasi Gothra Mahasabha (AGMS) — literally, the Grand Assembly of Adivasi Lineages. The 2001 struggle concluded when the Congress-led government inked an agreement with the protesters. It promised the distribution of land in combination with livelihoods and inclusion of all Adivasi land in the Fifth Schedule of the Constitution. The Fifth Schedule provided special safeguards, including decision-making rights over the use of land and other resources. It is important to note that until then Kerala never had any Fifth Schedule areas.[7] This demand clearly underscored the need for social and political control over land.

Despite agreeing in 2001 to complete land distribution within a year and setting up a dedicated agency called the Tribal Resettlement and Development Mission (TRDM), Wayanad Adivasis did not get any land. The Aralam resettlement site was established in 2004 in the adjacent Kannur district, but many households that went over to the site found it uninhabitable. There was no news of the declaration of Fifth Schedule areas either. These events prompted Janu and her followers to occupy a stretch of unused land in the Muthanga forests in Wayanad in January 2003. On 19 February 2003, the Congress government ordered a police crackdown, leading to the deaths of an Adivasi protester and a Dalit policeman. The

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[7] Including Adivasi areas in the Fifth Schedule allows the implementation of the 1995 Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act that would lead to the setting up of representative Adivasi village assemblies with wide-ranging powers over resource use.

Muthanga Sambhavam (Muthanga incident) became a landmark in the political history of Kerala. Steur (2011, 2017) notes that these land struggles spurred the participants to actively identify as Adivasis and not just agricultural labourers.

The demand for social and political control over land resurfaced during the Chengara Struggle of 2007, the Arippa Struggle that started in 2012 and the Nilpu Samaram (Stand-up Protest) of 2014. In the Nilpu Samaram, the participants refused to sit down until their demands for land distribution, implementation of the 2006 Forest Rights Act (FRA) and the declaration of Fifth Schedule areas were met.[8] The struggle forced the Congress-led State government to identify around 2,500 settlements for inclusion under the Fifth Schedule, but the proposal is yet to receive the approval of the Union government.

The demands that led to these struggles have two key characteristics. First, the struggles demanded not just a piece of land but substantive social and political control over it.[9] This is most evident in the call to include Adivasi settlements in the Fifth Schedule. The demand for the effective implementation of the FRA is another instance (not relevant to Aralam since it is not forest land). Currently, in the absence of such control and in the wake of extreme precariousness, Adivasis express the demand for land as the practical need for a livelihood source and a place to build a house. This should not be seen as contradicting the demand for larger social and political control — the two demands co-exist and must be located against the backdrop of extreme marginalization. Among activists as well as ordinary Adivasis, both demands are expressed with equal significance. Land is simultaneously seen as a productive resource, social justice, dignity, security, memory, identity and territory.

As Steur (2017) rightly points out, some Adivasi activists may invoke a romantic Indigenous past as a trope to demand land, which may appear to contrast with ordinary Adivasis' pragmatic desire for productive pieces of land. However, this desire does not negate the aspiration for substantive social and political control over land.

Second, it must be underscored that the demands are for land, not for more welfare programmes, although the state in Kerala is more amenable to the latter. A vast scholarship has documented the welfare generosity of the state of Kerala, which has exceeded the expectations from a welfare-oriented developing country like India, with some scholars

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[8] The 2006 Scheduled Tribes and Other Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act (FRA), commonly known as the Forest Rights Act, recognizes the rights of individual households and of communities over forest resources. Since the FRA is not relevant to the Aralam resettlement site, which is non-forest 'revenue land', it is not being included for detailed examination here.

[9] For an elaboration of Indigenous peoples seeking social and political control over land, see Goodwin's (2017) examination of Ecuador.

referring to it as the 'Kerala model' and others critiquing it (Devika, 2016; Franke and Chasin, 1989; Heller, 1999; Jeffrey, 1992; Raman, 2010; Sen, 1992). Despite low economic growth in Kerala, land reform, public investments in health, education and social security, unionization of labour and decentralization of power had a positive impact on human development indicators in the State. Kerala has also had a long history of social transfers earmarked for the Adivasis. These are currently channelled through its Scheduled Tribe Development Department. In recent years, Kerala State governments have boasted of spending two per cent of their annual budget on Adivasis, while they represent 1.5 per cent of the State's population (GoK, 2019). As will be shown, welfare is used as a tool by the state to address the Adivasis' inability to form a relationship with distributed land. The welfare transfers, however, has failed in their mission, leading to land abandonment.

The Aralam Project

The Aralam resettlement project came into being against the backdrop of the land struggles discussed above. The AGMS and the Adivasi Dalit Samara Samithi (Adivasi Dalit Protest Forum) led minor land struggles in Aralam in 2002 which later fed into the Muthanga Struggle. Before its selection as a resettlement site, Aralam was a horticultural farm under the control of the federal state, growing fruits and spices. In 2004, the Congress government in Kerela used Rs 420 million (US\$ 9.25 million) of its Tribal Sub-Plan (a component of the annual budget allocated to Adivasis) to buy 7,000 acres of the farm to fulfil its agreement with the Adivasis following the 2001 Kudilketti Samaram (Sreerekha, 2010). However, resettling Adivasis in Aralam proceeded sluggishly.

Half of the area of the farm was marked for distribution and the other half was to be maintained as a farm to guarantee livelihoods. However, in 2009, the CPI(M)-led government decided to turn the farm into a company that would not employ Adivasis as permanent workers. This decision was spurred by the demands of the existing (non-Adivasi) employees who created the Aikya Thozhilali Karshaka Sangham (United Worker–Farmer Group), backed by the CPI(M) (ibid.). The CPI(M)'s discomfort with the rise of autonomous movements, especially identity-based struggles, which might challenge its hold over the labouring classes (Devika, 2010; Steur, 2014) is another factor that played a role in supporting the permanent workers.

Aralam was completely ignored in the years that followed. The farm started to make losses from the time the State government took over in 2004. Former employees critical of

the government pointed out that the farm became merely a secure job, with salaries paid by the state, whilst the state made no serious effort to invest in profit-generating activities. Except for a primary school in the initial years, the resettlement area had no facilities for education or healthcare. Adequate transportation is still a challenge. Between 2005 and 2010, 14 people died due to a lack of medical facilities and transportation to reach healthcare facilities outside (Mathrubhumi, 2017). The implementation of the NREGS has been patchy. Some never received their job cards, while many were given work outside the farm which involved significant transportation costs. The residents were also not given any support to build houses or establish a livelihood during this period. Conflict with wildlife was a recurrent problem. Data received from the TRDM office at the time of fieldwork in 2018 showed that 1,184 of the 3,375 land recipient households had abandoned their plots.

Faced with a crippling inability to set up their lives, the Adivasis protested in front of the Kannur district collectorate in 2008, supported by the AGMS and the Kerala Pulaya Mahasabha (Grand Assembly of the Pulayas). The struggle lasted six months and repeated the demands of earlier struggles to grant substantive control over the land. Sensing trouble, the state shifted its strategy and launched new welfare programmes in Aralam, injecting funds that exceeded the amount previously allocated to the Adivasis. The response of the state to Adivasi land claims is discussed in greater detail in the next section.

STATE LIFE

The nature of the state's responses to Adivasi land demands merits closer scrutiny. In the case of landless Adivasis, the state in Kerala has devised several 'make live' measures for the population. To understand such policies, it is instructive to consider Foucault (1976/2003), who traced the shift in authority of the sovereign state in 18th century Europe from the power to 'kill or let live' to the power to 'make live or let die'. In the case of the former, it was the sovereign's right to kill that granted the state legitimacy.

After this shift, the state came to focus on 'governing' the population — not just persons — through the careful employment of statistical measures, focus on hygiene and the medicalization of social problems (Li, 2010a). Foucault called this 'biopower'. 'Make live' strategies used in biopolitics did not require direct use of force to manipulate people's behaviour; the state masterfully incorporated incentives and disincentives into the programmes designed to improve people's lives. However, although Foucault outlined the idea of biopolitics, he did not elaborate on 'when or how biopolitics will be activated' (ibid.:

66). In this article, the lens of state life is employed to help us understand how a particular form of biopolitics can be galvanized in response to land claims by a surplus population.

The notion of 'the state' in this article refers to the entity which comes together through its practices. As Abrams pointed out, the state is 'at most a message of domination — an ideological artefact attributing unity, morality and independence to the disunited, amoral and dependent workings of the practice of government' (Abrams, 1988: 81). A focus on state practices helps us understand the seeming unity and coherence that the state presents (Mitchell, 1991). Practices of planning contribute to producing such unity of the state. This is not to suggest that a committee sat together and devised state life — there is often no seamless continuity from policy thinking to planning and implementation. This article focuses on practices of government as observed in Aralam to bring into relief the state's conception of a particular form of life for its Adivasi citizens. The narrative is built through linking observations from the field — of resettled Adivasis and their daily struggles — rather than through a juxtaposition of policy design and implementation.

Aralam echoes a long history of state-sponsored projects that have ended up in failure. As shown by Goldman (1993), in the case of water supply projects in arid Rajasthan, or Carney (1998), in the case of pump irrigation in the Gambia, often these improvement projects ultimately increase rather than reduce social inequality. Aralam arguably also brings to mind Scott's (1998) description of the grand projects that states devise to control their population. By constructing cities, land-use patterns and new settlements that the state can 'see' by means of maps, grids and orderly naming, it hopes to improve people's lives, but the projects ultimately fail. However, it must be noted that the projects Scott (1998) analysed were largely implemented by authoritarian states that had disproportionate power to resettle people, sometimes over vast distances, to suit their grand schemes. In these cases, resistance was brutally crushed.

By contrast, Aralam was established in response to land struggles by the Adivasis and not in pursuit of a high-modernist ambition.[10] The state was prepared to listen to the people but interpreted their demands in its own way. Such reinterpretations shaped state life, leading to the project's failure despite the presence of social movements. As Li (2005) remarks with respect to state-led improvement, rather than the direct application of power that the high-modernist state pursues, more dispersed form of regulation is favoured as a less despotic form

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[10] 'High modernism' (Scott, 1998) refers to the use of science, technology and planning by states in designing and reordering the lives their populations.

of power. Drawing on Foucault, Li points out that to better understand the work of the state in such situations, it is important to look beyond high modernism to understand how the 'art of government' carries out the task of improvement. In this article, the task is undertaken through the examination of state life. Its findings echo the concerns that Ferguson (1990) raises about what development projects do in practice and the contradictory and chaotic effects they produce.

The remainder of the current section explains the analytical usefulness of state life. First, it allows us to understand how states manage protesting surplus populations. In the case of Aralam, distributing land through a loss-making project became a readily available strategy to manage the Adivasis. When recipients started to protest due to an inability to form a relationship with the land, the state accelerated its welfare transfers to aid their survival. This is not to suggest that welfare transfers are unnecessary. While the Adivasis see land with social and political control as a strong foundation to set up lives and as a productive resource, a guarantor of dignity, security, history and memory, welfare is a measure that merely eases the onslaught of capitalist markets. By sustaining life, social transfers help subsidize the reproduction of labour power (Gough, 1979). These transfers can take the form of food support, investments in infrastructure such as schools and hospitals or, as in the case of Aralam, fencing to ward off wild animals.

Second, state life allows us to qualify the kind of 'countermovement' that welfare transfers are — in the Kerala case, welfare was initiated by the state as a means of retaining Adivasis on the resettlement site. Viewed through a Polanyian lens, demands for both land and welfare can be seen as countermovements to the domination of capitalist markets over life (Polanyi, 1944). In this framework, countermovements can be taken up by state actors, not only by citizens. Kerala's Adivasis consider land, not welfare, as the preferred path to attaining autonomy. Land struggles often occur in response to an increase in the commodification of land which 'disembeds' it from social relations. In the case of Kerala's Adivasis, land movements were a reaction to an increase in the commodification of labour in the post-liberalization period which accentuated the precariousness of the landless. Welfare transfers might aid survival, but employing this measure to sustain failing land distribution projects shows how the state can impose limits on the success of peoples' countermovements for land.

Third, state life allows us to unpack the particular relationship of citizenship that unfolds between Adivasi citizens and the state. As demonstrated in the previous section, Adivasi have consistently been marginalized by the state in Kerala under various

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governments. However, they were not abandoned. The state allocated resettlement sites in response to their demands, reducing land to a palliative measure. Weak title documents further marginalize Adivasi citizens in the resettlement sites (discussed below). The extensive scholarship on resettlement after displacement demonstrates the fraught relationship between Adivasi citizens and the state.

A brief discussion of this literature illustrates how the lens of state life can have wider relevance. The heavily scrutinized Sardar Sarovar Project on the Narmada River in India is one such case.[11] Chattopadhyay (2010) shows in the case of the Sardar Sarovar Project that resettlement projects create a new spatiality of life that cannot reproduce the old one; space acts as container of social relationships. Resettled people in Chattopadhyay's study referred to their old habitations as 'lost space' because, in the new space, lives designed by the state could not reproduce the old human and interspecies relationships.

This aspect of state life seen in Chattopadhyay's story is found in the Aralam case as well. Resettled people acknowledge that their social relationships, including those of economic dependence on upper-caste people for their livelihoods, disintegrate when they move to a new place. As Steur (2017) also points out in the case of Kerala, they may not want to move to far-away resettlement sites at all. At the same time, this does not mean an attachment to colonies. Spatially and socially, the colonies mark caste oppression. State life allows us to unpack the elements of a resettlement project that seek to draw people towards it, prompting them to risk the move. The effort is seldom rewarded, as Aralam shows.

A fourth analytical utility of state life is that it allows participation in debates about Indigenous identity by bringing out how states perceive and use identities in its responses (elaborated below). Steur (ibid.) shows that Adivasi social movements often faced criticism from civil society when the ordinary Adivasis who were not activists took up assigned plots elsewhere, against the activists' claims of an Indigenous past. In this article, the acceptance of plots is used as starting point to go on to delineate the state's assumptions informing the projects (see also, Baviskar, 1995). Unpacking the ways in which the state perceives Adivasi identity in designing a project like Aralam sheds light on how such assumptions are deployed by the state to manage land movements.

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[11] See, for example, Baviskar (1995), Maitra (2009), Sangvai (1995).

LIVING THE STATE LIFE

The map received of Aralam shows that there was a design to the eeriness and disorientation I experienced during the time I spent on the site covered in tall grasses. The land distribution site is situated between the farm and the Aralam wildlife sanctuary (from which the original farm was carved out in the 1970s). The TRDM office, a decrepit two-room building, was the administrative centre of the site. Although the entire site fell under the larger Aralam *grama panchayath* (the lowest tier of local government), the TRDM office was the first point of contact between the state and residents. The office had a site manager, a clerk, an engineer and around 12 'tribal promoters', field-level agents who are recruited from among the Adivasis on a two-year contract. This office was the lowest in the hierarchy of Kerala's Scheduled Tribes Development Department.

In this section, state life in Aralam is analysed in detail. Some of the problems associated with Aralam — human-wildlife conflict, tenuous land documents and the inability to form a relationship with the land — may not appear to be unique to a resettlement project. However, considering the mundane aspects of Aralam life highlight how the state manifests itself in its practices. It must be noted that the state designed Aralam in full knowledge of the problems that would arise. Its choice of location reflects the state's intention to devise a state life for the people — the resisting Adivasis needed to be disposed of and their land struggles terminated. Aralam provided a solution that did not require the transfer of forest land or sought-after revenue land.

Reducing Land to Welfare

The reduction of land to welfare refers to a situation in which the distributed land is not of sufficient quality to provide a stable life through subsistence farming, or even in combination with wage labour. Respondents remarked that the only utility of the land was in the form of a place to stay from which to search for wage labour. As such, land facilitates the reproduction of labour and therefore fulfils a welfare function. Three aspects that shape this situation — human–wildlife conflict, the lack of wage work and the limited rights contained in the state-provided land documentation — are discussed next.

The presence of elephants on the site was so disruptive that resettled Adivasis effectively held on to the land only as a place to stay, reproduce their labour power and look for work outside the premises. While human–animal conflict might be a generic issue that

impedes farming in many parts of the world, Aralam has a specific problem in its design: the resettlement site is situated between the farm and the wildlife sanctuary. This effectively renders the resettlement site a buffer zone, with residents fulfilling the role of cushion between the elephants in the forests and the crops on the farm. In designing Aralam, the current farm area could have been converted into the settlement site. However, the government decided to retain it as horticulture company. During fieldwork in 2022, residents informed me that about 40 elephants were hiding in the tall grass. Mini, a Paniya resident, expressed her frustration: 'The government will say that they have given land. What is the point of giving just land? Can you eat land?'.[12] The elephant terror is so severe that farming is practically impossible, which has resulted in people abandoning their plots.

The matter of employment on the farm illustrates the argument that the land merely allows survival from one day to the next. The design of the resettlement project denied Adivasis employment on the farm and provided only occasional casual wage work. The rules required residents to work informally for around 250 days without a break, before they could expect a long-term contract. Most Adivasis could not meet this requirement. A Right to Information request revealed that there were 105 Paniya casual workers at Aralam. According to Priya, a clerk at the TRDM project office from the affluent Hindu Nair caste, the Paniyas were the problem. She remarked that the Paniyas do not complete 250 days despite being given food bought with tribal funds, and that *vikasikkaan* (development) will take a lot of time for the Adivasis.

The patronizing tone was present in the voices of several other bureaucrats at higher and lower levels of the tribal department. Newspaper coverage offered a different perspective. The farm was running at a loss, with the result that workers were often unpaid. Subsequent events exhibited a familiar pattern of worker strikes, followed by state rescue through emergency grants. At least three rounds of this entire cycle occurred during the first fieldwork period (Mathrubhumi, 2017; Suprabhatham, 2019). Workers could not afford to wait until the release of funds and went in search of alternative work, missing the threshold of 250 days (Mathrubhumi, 2018). Getting out of Aralam and finding work outside was arduous because of high transportation costs. In this way, the design of Aralam made it extremely difficult for Adivasis to find for alternative work. Their only alternative was living outside the settlement in the former Adivasi colonies, which meant a return to landlessness.

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[12] Interview with Mini, Aralam, 15 January 2018.

If the plots were a secure asset that could be used for raising credit or other ends, the land would have been of more help. This brings us to the third example of the *kaivasharekha*, or 'the document of having in hand (land)'. The document issued to Adivasis simply states that a plot has been assigned. Since it falls short of a title deed that certifies *pattayam* (full ownership) the Malayalam term *kaivasharekha* is used here. The limitations of the kaivasharekha are connected to the design of the resettlement project and is useful in understanding similar documents in other resettlement sites. The kaivasharekha is bound by the 2008 Kerala Land Assignment to Scheduled Tribes Rules, the primary legal mechanism for distributing land to the Adivasis.[13] It does not allow the sale or gifting of land. Neither can the land be used as collateral for loans. Residents are also not permitted to cut trees, including branches, even if it is to clear space for building a house.

To use the insightful framework on rights to resources by Schlager and Ostrom (1992), the kaivasharekha merely allows access to land and withdrawal of permitted products from the land, but not the right to manage the land or decide which products could be withdrawn. Moreover, since the TRDM administration retains the right to remove pre-existing trees or plants and undertake improvements on the land, it does not grant the right to decide who may or may not access the resource (the right to exclude) nor does it grant the right to sell or gift the land (the right to alienate). As such, kaivasharekha holders are simply 'authorized users', the category that has the least rights. Most importantly, the document allows the state to force the evacuees to return by means of the threat to nullify the document. Use is made of this threat as it was widely reported in the Malayalam media during fieldwork conducted in 2018 and 2022. Several respondents remarked that they felt like tenants on their land. The welfare transfers they received were tied to the kaivasharekha as proof of residence. The comments 'we have no foundation here' and 'we feel thrown here' occur repeatedly in my transcripts.

The reduction of land to welfare provides key analytical insights regarding the state's approach to managing surplus population. First, the three issues described above — all emerging from how Aralam had been envisaged — reveal a peculiar form of state–citizen relationship, in which the state appears to respond to the Adivasis' demands after persistent agitations, but the nature of this response was such that it made the possibility of their gaining

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[13] These Rules were formulated under the 1960 Kerala Land Assignment Act. Note that the laws (and the TRDM) pertain to the distribution of *revenue* land owned by the Kerala state and are implemented by the Revenue Department. Forests are the other category of land owned by the state. Aralam Farm and TRDM site fall under revenue land.

social and political control more remote. 'Improvement' is fraught with tension in these projects. State actors in Aralam do not exhibit the 'will to improve' that Li (2007) detects in Indonesia in her study of state actors taking welfare projects to people. Li traces this strong commitment to better people's living conditions back to paternalistic efforts to interfere in people's lives during colonial times. In contrast to the concern shown by Indonesian development agents, state agents I interviewed spoke with disdain of the Adivasis. Kerala's tribal officers exhibited what could be termed 'improvement fatigue' — that so much was already being done but the Adivasis just would not 'improve'. The failure of recent investments in welfare programmes strengthened this line of thinking.

Second, within the framework of welfarism, surplus populations can be managed cheaply through the piecemeal distribution of lands that the state no longer wants to take care of, as seen in the case of loss-making Aralam. A similar trend could be discerned in several other resettlement sites where revenue land that was no longer considered useful by the state was distributed. This regime of land distribution is distinct from the land reform of the 20th century (e.g. in Kerala, Cuba or China) as well as that being undertaken in the 21st century (e.g. in South Africa, Zimbabwe or Brazil), as there is no commitment to addressing land inequality or underlying power relations. The Kerela state's response to the demands of the Adivasis represents an attempt to employ land distribution in a manner that is aimed at steering surplus populations away from protests. This is done through the implementation of dedicated projects like Aralam that design a particular state-envisaged life for the landless that the state hopes will make them stay on.

Employment of a Welfare Fix

For almost a decade after the resettlement project was established, Aralam did not attract the attention of the Kerala state with respect to the provision of welfare programmes. As plot abandonments increased and protests against the conflict with elephants intensified, the project came under serious threat. The Adivasis who had left their plots had to be brought back. To facilitate their return, the state amplified its application of its welfare apparatus. In 2018, a host of new infrastructure projects funded by the National Bank for Agricultural and Rural Development was declared, budgeted at Rs 607.50 million (US$ 7.4 million) (KLA, 2018a). Besides roads, concrete culverts and bridges, women's self-help groups and training programmes for farmers were announced. In 2022, I found a bridge under construction, but the main roads were still dilapidated, surrounded by tall grass that attracted elephants. The

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existing primary school had been elevated to a secondary school. A new Model Residential School, the state's experiment in running boarding schools for Adivasi students, had been founded.

Further, under the Gothrasarathi ('chauffeur to tribes') project, private jeeps were hired to transport students to schools and curb dropout. Students in the Aralam schools were given free breakfast, in addition to the usual lunch. There was also a Primary Health Centre with a free ambulance and a relatively new palliative care service. In addition to the rice that Adivasis in Kerala receive through fair price shops, Aralam residents were given 15 kg extra a month. A large amount of funds for housing was transferred to the state agency Nirmiti Kendra, but poor implementation has given the residents Aralam only faulty construction with leaking roofs and walls.

Far from any high modernist ambitions of control, the state allowed participatory governance on the resettlement site — through the cosmetic institution of *oorukoottams* (village assemblies) in every block. The state has had little success in implementing NREGS or the Kudumbashree programme, aimed at forming women's self-help groups. The fencing of the resettlement site to restrict elephant movements has also had mixed results. Recent scholarship on multi-species ethnography has shown that elephants remember their old paths and find new mechanisms to break through fences (Barua, 2014; Locke and Buckingham, 2016; Münster, 2014), thus the matter cannot be reduced to an infrastructure problem. Documented responses of ministers of Scheduled Tribe Development at the Kerala Legislative Assembly, contain long lists of welfare programmes with budgetary allocations signalling that enough was being done (KLA, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c).

The welfare-fix approach, which refers to the use of amplified welfare transfers to sustain life in resettlement sites, has specific implications for the relationship between citizens and the state. First, increased welfare measures create the impression that the state has designed a comfortable life for resettled Adivasis citizens and that the onus therefore rests on the Adivasis to present themselves as worthy of such welfare. Access to welfare is tied to the possession of the kaivasharekha through which the state legitimizes both the welfare programmes and the document. As studies have shown, welfare becomes the legitimization technique used by the state, wherein presenting oneself as a worthy recipient of welfare becomes the ticket to enjoy the other entitlements attached to full citizenship (see, for example, Anand, 2017). State power is legitimized through this process.

Second, the amplification of welfare programmes attempts to mask the intention behind establishing resettlement sites like Aralam, which is the disposal of surplus

population. Representatives of the welfare state understand that as citizens, this surplus population too, have rights. However, the repeated statements by the residents that they feel dumped in settlement sites unveil the mask. Although the state did not use brute force to make people stay on in Aralam, the threat of taking away the kaivasharekha and the enticement of the welfare programmes combined are designed to keeping this surplus population under control. As Foucault suggests, the state knows when to intervene and when not to (Burchell et al., 1991). Welfare intervention was thus amplified only when the project appeared to crumble. This brings to the fore another crucial aspect of state life: unlike the grand scheme of an orderly resettlement site, 'these schemes work on and through the practices and desires of their target populations' (Li, 2005: 383). Welfare attempts to redirect the actions of the land recipients, cajoling them to return and stay on.

Mobilizing Assumptions

State life in Aralam is informed by various assumptions about the Adivasis. The kaivasharekha reveals paternalistic, condescending beliefs about Adivasis — that they are incapable of managing land and that it would be alienated if accompanied by the full range of rights (see also Li, 2010b). These assumptions rest on the idea that the provision of any land would improve the Adivasis' lives, given the romanticized perception that Adivasis hold a close relationship with land. This assumption proved unhelpful when they increasingly started to abandon the plots and the state was forced to resolve the issue by expanding welfare transfers. As my interlocutors repeatedly pointed out — there was nothing essential in their relationship with the distributed land; forming a relationship was a daily struggle.

Rights and restrictions associated with Adivasi lands is a complex issue (Kannabiran, 2016; Sundar, 2009). The dilution of Adivasi land laws in India, has been the subject of consistent criticism from activists and scholars, notably in the case of the FRA (Sonavane and Gandhi, 2018), the Chhota Nagpur Tenancy Act (Upadhya, 2009), and the Santhal Parganas Tenancy Act (Rao, 2009). Adivasi land sales were prohibited to counter predatory land acquisition (Wahi and Bhatia, 2018). Land alienation was partly the reason Paniyas and other communities in Aralam became landless in the first place. The opposition to the kaivasharekha, was not due to the wish to sell off lands, but for Adivasis to given substantive rights to improve their lives on land that is cultivable. As discussed above, not only does the

document prohibit the sale of land — it does not even allow autonomous management of the resources on the land.

Another set of assumptions is revealed in the context of the different communities from diverse sociological backgrounds that the state assigned plots to in Aralam. This leads to various perceptions of state life by these communities. A couple of episodes from the field illustrate these assumptions. Although the Paniyas form the majority, there is a small number of Mavila and Karimpala communities that were added to the list of Scheduled Tribes in 2003 (GoI, 2003). With a history of oppression, these two communities have had a long history as rubber farm workers and labourers in the urban informal sectors. When they received land in Aralam, they took advantage of their skills in rubber farming and exceeded the Paniyas in terms of living standards. This often led to them holding condescending views about the Paniyas.

Explaining why she thought they struggled, one interlocutor complained that the Paniyas did not join self-help groups. She said, 'People like us who have *kazhivu* (capability), who have *vivaravum bodhavum* (knowledge and sensibility) should push them. Only then will they come forward'.[14] According to two tribal promoters from the Kurichya community, also occupying a higher social status compared to the Paniyas: 'First they need to know how to live properly. There is a lot of ignorance among them. They spend all that they get. They never save for tomorrow'.[15] Referring to Paniyas as 'ignorant' and 'never saving' was a regular occurrence during interviews.

Without wanting to overstate the significance of these neighbourhood conversations, they illustrate how state life can bring together communities with diverse historical relationships with land, simply because they all fall into a common administrative category, in this case the Scheduled Tribes. Bringing communities with differing histories to Aralam has material impacts: there is hardly any Paniya in a tribal promoter position; self-help groups are largely run by non-Paniya communities; and there is also the humiliation of being patronized and castigated. Although all residents get an equal share of the welfare transfers, the Paniyas were singled out as having become lazy. This has implications for the future. For instance, even if social and political control over resettlement sites were to be granted, the most marginalized would likely be in a disadvantaged position in terms of power relations.

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[14] Interview, Aralam, 2 December 2017.
[15] Interview with tribal promoters, Aralam, 3 December 2017.

Thus, even if Aralam were brought under the Fifth Schedule, living the state life implies that the Paniyas will remain at the fringes of decision-making.

Yet another assumption of state life is the state's concern that the resettled won't survive if the old ways of life were not maintained. Conversations with the Aralam officials confirmed this observation. This can be seen in the manner land was allocated in Aralam to those who came from Wayanad. They were given land exclusively in one 'block' of the site. However, unlike in other blocks where an acre was given to each household (to set up a house and to farm), in this block, the households were given 10 cents each of adjacent plots for housing. The farming plots of 90 cents each were given in scattered parts of the block. Residents like Mini objected to this arrangement: 'It is still like the colonies of Wayanad!', she exclaimed, referring to the fact that the design reproduced the cramped colonies of Wayanad.[16] It betrayed the paternalistic assumption that the Paniyas of Wayanad were used to living in cramped colonies and thus should be kept in similar circumstances in Aralam, without which they would fall apart. Mini and several other Paniya residents echoed this observation. The Paniyas thus lived a state life in which the state's perception of them as needing protection duplicated the condescending attitude of the other communities.

The state's assumptions about resettled people reveals a further, related characteristic of state life: managing identities is integral to managing surplus populations. In designing state life, the state chose to ignore some identities while emphasizing others. By carefully creating a semblance of responsiveness to land demands represents a subtle means by which the state can constrain countermovements for land. Through stressing the larger Adivasi identity, countermovements led by activists too are absorbed into the state's scheme. This occurs when these countermovements bring them together as 'Adivasis' before the state without considering the differences in the relationship that the different communities within that category have had with land historically.

CONCLUSION

Aralam is a project which represents one instantiation of the agrarian question of labour manifesting in the form of land struggles. The case provides insight into what happens *after* land struggles. For the Adivasis, the struggle continues as they enter the resettlement sites to

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[16] Interview with Mini, Aralam, 17 December 2017.

live the state life. They are reminded daily of how far a cry the conditions they are living in on a resettlement project is from the social and political control over land that they sought. As citizens, their relationship with the state is characterized by the requirement to present themselves as worthy of welfare programmes. While Aralam is crumbling, the state continues to sustain it through an amplified transfer of welfare programmes. In the absence of stable work and faced with a constant battle with wildlife, the Adivasis abandon the land and return to landlessness. Land struggles are bound to occur all over Kerala for several years to come.

This article discussed how state life helps us to understand the ways in which the state manages a landless population that has become irrelevant to the local growth path. It showed that this can be achieved without completely dismissing them — through scattered land distribution projects. Through the allocation of land, the need for the reproduction of life and labour can be met, thus reducing the plots to welfare. If the project faces failure, the state could attempt to 'fix' it with extensive welfare support. In this pursuit of addressing the challenges of sustaining lives on the resettlement sites, the state could draw on the various assumptions it holds about how Adivasis/Indigenous peoples relate to land.

Beyond Kerala, the mechanisms deployed to shape state life in Aralam can shed light on resettlement sites around the world that are intended for the landless but increasingly also those who are displaced by development projects, environmental disasters and climate change. These projects are the result of the slow processes of state–citizen negotiations arising from struggles in democratic societies. Methodologically, instead of a simplistic reading of policy against implementation, an ethnographic enquiry into the practices of the state, as undertaken in this article, can provide insight into how land/welfare compromises are reached through these negotiations.

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