

Migration and Tribal Life

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Abstract

This paper explores the complex effects of migration on the tribal communities of Wayanad, Kerala, focusing on the Paniya and Adiya Adivasi tribes. It highlights how waves of internal agrarian migration from Travancore in the 20th century reshaped Wayanad's socio-economic and political landscape. While migration contributed to economic growth, it also led to the displacement and marginalization of indigenous communities, eroding their traditional livelihoods, culture, and land rights. The paper critiques the lack of structured research, emphasizing that biased oral accounts often oversimplify migration's impacts. Additionally, it discusses how education and religious efforts by migrant communities reinforced existing social inequalities, further alienating tribal populations. Through this analysis, the paper underscores the power imbalances between migrant settlers and the indigenous tribes, who have borne the brunt of economic and social marginalization.

Key Words: Internal agrarian migration, *Paniya-Adiya* tribes, Land alienation, Tribal marginalization, Social reproduction theory, Cultural and Political marginalization

Introduction

This paper explores the history of migration and its effects on the tribal communities of Wayanad, Kerala. Migration has always been a part of human history, as people move in search of better living conditions and new opportunities. Kerala has seen various types of migration, from internal movements to other Indian states to large-scale migration to the Gulf and Western countries.

One important form of migration was the agrarian migration from Travancore to Wayanad, which significantly impacted the tribal populations of the region. This movement wasn't well-organized but resulted in major changes to Wayanad's economy, society, and political landscape. Migrants, particularly from the Catholic community, settled in the area and brought large-scale agriculture, pushing the indigenous tribes like the Paniya and Adiya into marginalized positions. The article discusses how these migrations, along with colonial and later policies, led to the exploitation of tribal lands and labor.

It also highlights the cultural and social impact of migration, including how the introduction of new economic systems, formal education, and religious practices disrupted the traditional way of life for these indigenous communities. As migrants took control of land and resources, tribal communities faced further alienation and loss of their cultural identity. The study emphasizes the long-lasting effects of migration on Wayanad's tribal population, with ongoing inequalities in political representation, social status, and economic opportunities.

The history of humanity is deeply intertwined with migration. People have moved in search of better environments, new ways of life, and fresh cultural experiences. Migration began with the earliest humans in Africa and has continued ever since, varying in scale across time. The history of the State of Kerala also is marked by various forms of migration. People from Kerala migrated to nearly all other Indian states, followed by large-scale migration to Gulf countries. In more recent years, they have moved to the USA, Canada, Australia, African nations, and European countries. It includes the agrarian migrations from Travancore in the 20th century and the large-scale Gulf migration, both of which significantly reshaped the society and economy of modern Kerala. This paper aims to explore the different aspects of internal agrarian migration from Travancore to Wayanad district and its effects on the tribal populations of the region.

Significant efforts are being made today to understand the processes and impacts of migration to Wayanad. However, most studies rely on oral accounts and tend to be descriptive. Many of these accounts appear biased, leading to numerous controversies. This is largely due to the absence of a structured research model and the lack of organized, scientific, and historical studies. The debate on the various reasons behind these migrations continues.

It is generally believed that the agrarian migration to Wayanad was neither organized nor pre-planned. Most of the migrants belonged to the Catholic community of the Syro-Malabar Diocese, and the majority were nominal small-scale farmers. Over time, they were supported by planters and large-scale cultivators for their own interests. A common interpretation is that this large-scale migration from Travancore led to the socio-economic, political, and cultural development of Wayanad. However, these migrations, along with the drastic transformation of the region's socio-economic landscape, are also seen as key factors contributing to the current extremely marginalized state of Wayanad's tribal populations. These migrations, much like elsewhere, had a profound effect on the indigenous communities, especially the *Paniya* and *Adiya* Adivasi tribes of Wayanad.

Wayanad, with its natural beauty and fertile land nestled in the Western Ghats, has a rich historical and cultural heritage. Its fertile soil and potential for agricultural diversification attracted migrants from various regions. The Gowda community from Mysore, present-day Karnataka, is regarded as the first group to migrate to Wayanad with such intentions. They reclaimed forest lands, took over land from tribal populations who often lacked legal documentation, and established large-scale agriculture, turning the local tribes into agrarian slaves. Following the Gowdas, Chettis from the Nilgiri-Gudalur areas of

present-day Tamil Nadu adopted similar practices. Though political in nature, the invasion of Wayanad by Pazhassi Raja can also be seen as a form of migration, as it brought in new trading communities who later exploited the tribal populations on a large scale. Colonialism in Wayanad emphasized plantation agriculture, which further negatively impacted tribal life, reducing the indigenous people to wage laborers, who then had to compete with newly migrated Muslim laborers for their livelihoods.

These migrations and invasions brought about significant changes in Wayanad, reshaping production and exchange systems. The primary outcome was the displacement of the tribal population from their long-standing subsistence practices. Their traditional way of life was overrun by the modern materialistic lifestyle introduced by migrants and colonial powers. Among the many reasons for the tribals' hardships, the large-scale agrarian migration from Travancore stands out as the most significant. In his Malayalam work *Keralathile America*, K. Panoor, one of the pioneers in tribal studies in Wayanad, highlights the systematic exploitation of the tribal population by migrants, the Catholic Church, and the bureaucracy.

After the death of Pazhassi Raja, the ruler of Kottayam who had claimed political control over Wayanad, the British East India Company took complete ownership of the region. Like elsewhere, the colonial administration focused on maximizing revenues, using their political and administrative powers to their advantage. In Wayanad, they revised land regulations and introduced new Forest Acts, Plantation Acts, and Revenue Acts, all designed to favor the colonial regime at the expense of the local people, especially the tribes. The tribal communities, with their traditional claims to collective ownership of agrarian and forest lands but lacking formal documentation, were unprepared to assert their rights against the colonial authorities. Even small-scale resistance, such as the Kurichiya Revolt of 1812, was brutally crushed by the British.

The *Paniya* and *Adiya* tribal communities, who practiced limited agriculture and mainly relied on foraging for survival, were forced to become unskilled agricultural laborers. British Forest Acts barred them from accessing forest lands, either for gathering resources or for practicing slash-and-burn agriculture. The large-scale coffee and tea plantations did not employ tribal laborers because they were unfamiliar with these new agricultural practices. This further marginalized the tribal communities, and the same socio-economic policies—such as market-oriented agriculture and the introduction of new crops and practices—adopted by later migrants only deepened their alienation. Migrant populations of Wayanad was often supported by the state or private interests, settle in tribal areas, leading to the alienation of tribal land. Indigenous peoples have been displaced or pushed to less fertile, marginalized areas as land ownership patterns change.

The commercialization of agriculture and its produce turned land into a highly valuable economic asset. Migrant farmers from Travancore bought land from local *Janmis*, and along with these purchases, they took over vast areas of tribal land, which lacked formal documentation, as well as unclaimed barren lands. With the assistance of corrupt bureaucrats, fake land documents were later created. Initially, these new landowners were accepted by the tribes since they primarily engaged in rice cultivation and employed tribal labourers who were familiar with rice cultivation activities and paying them in cash. However, they were also accused of introducing intoxicating drinks to the tribal communities, fostering dependency. A closer examination of the lifestyles of the tribal people and the operating methods of the migrant agricultural communities is necessary to fully understand the complete alienation of tribes such as the *Paniya* and *Adiya*.

As previously mentioned, these tribes were entirely reliant on nature for their subsistence, viewing natural resources as communal property and their primary source of daily sustenance. They were unaware of the new land documentation procedures introduced by rulers, making their lands susceptible to exploitation and control by various waves of migrants over time. The *Adiya* and *Paniya* tribes, among the lowest in the social hierarchy, were reduced to agricultural slaves, compensated only with grains and goods. Despite this, they still had to forage to survive. The colonial government, large landowners like the *Devaswom*, *Janmis*, and later migrants, relentlessly forced them out of their traditional homes. This system of exploitation was later institutionalized, with the festival held at *Valliyoorkekavu* temple near Mananthavady in Wayanad becoming a symbol of the entrenched system of slavery. Migrant farmers also used deceptive tactics to acquire the land of other tribal communities, even those with formal ownership claims.

Proponents of migration argue that it liberated the tribal population from the oppressive *Janmi* system, portraying migration as a harmonious new socio-economic relationship. They emphasize the introduction of the wage labor system as a positive development that freed tribes from economic enslavement. Although the tribes were paid in cash and received some recognition as human beings, their wages remained minimal, and they were never granted equal social status. Public spaces continued to be inaccessible to them."

To a large extent, these tribal communities were liberated from the oppression of the feudal agrarian system by the so-called 'liberal' capitalist production system. However, this shift merely reproduced the social system in a new form, perpetuating exploitation. The wage system may have freed them from direct slavery, but exploitation and subjugation persisted. In 2020, a criminal case was filed against a migrant farmer and his son, residents of Kenichira near Mananthavady, for the murder of a tribal youth following a dispute over wages. The promise of labor mobility remains unfulfilled, as many tribal laborers are still bound to their migrant landowners across generations. Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction is highly relevant to the social structures maintained by these migrant communities. It illustrates how social structures and systems continually reinforce and reproduce inequalities over time, helping us understand how class structures, cultural practices, and education systems have perpetuated social inequities in Wayanad across generations.

Another significant claim made by proponents of development through migration is that it promoted the universalization of general education. There is no doubt that the migration process contributed to the establishment of numerous educational institutions across Wayanad. However, a closer examination of the structure and outcomes of Wayanad's general education system post-independence reveals that it primarily benefited the migrant population, not the tribal people. Migrants introduced formal education as a way to improve the lives of tribal populations. However, the education system they established in Wayanad mostly reflected the values and culture of the dominant migrant groups, putting indigenous children at a disadvantage.

Schools and colleges set up by migrant communities focused on the needs of the migrants, while tribal students were often underrepresented and neglected. Even when there was an attempt to introduce the basics of the Paniya language in Wayanad schools, it faced strong opposition from Christian corporate management, who took their protests to the streets.

Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction is relevant here: instead of promoting equality, the education system reinforces existing social inequalities by favoring migrant populations who already have cultural advantages. Tribal students, lacking these advantages, often struggle to succeed in this system. Claims of introducing secular education without social barriers are undermined by secondary school statistics, which present a negative picture of student enrollment and achievement among tribal communities. For instance, St. Catherine's Higher Secondary School, established in 1942 as the first of its kind in the region, is now considered an elite institution with minimal tribal enrollment. The same applies to the establishment of St. Mary's College in Sultan's Battery, where the Catholic Church was accused of capturing tribal lands, resulting in violent resistance and prolonged legal battles.

The underlying aim of the migrant Christian community, as elsewhere, was to create a class of converts from their ranks through the spread of education. Interestingly, there were few, if any, conversions to Christianity from the *Paniya* and *Adiya* communities, likely due to resistance from other landowning classes who feared the loss of their laborers if conversion led to a free society. What the education system ultimately created was a class of tribal people who lost their language, culture, and lifestyle. Nevertheless, pro-migrant scholars view these damaging structural changes and cultural blending as signs of progress for tribal communities.

The cultural effects of migration on tribal communities also need to be considered. Migration brings new cultural influences, and the dominant culture of migrants often overpowers the traditional way of life of the indigenous people. As a result, the tribal groups of Wayanad like the *Paniya* and *Adiya* were forced to adopt the migrants' culture, which led to the loss of their own language, traditions, and cultural practices. This process of losing their culture has been made worse by the spread of formal education and modern economic systems introduced by migrant communities in which the tribal communities had no role at all to play.

Traditionally, indigenous tribes have lived in close-knit communities, relying on shared land and farming for their survival. However, their way of life in Wayanad is now in crisis as it is being replaced by private ownership and capitalist economic systems brought by the migrant settlers. The migrant populations in Wayanad worked hard to achieve economic success. With support from political and religious leaders, along with access to capital, they took control of most economic opportunities in the area. Meanwhile, tribal communities like the *Paniyas* and *Adiyas*, who were excluded from all forms of economic activity except for wage labor, became even more marginalized. They were pushed into the lowest levels of the labor market, with many becoming landless laborers or falling into debt, working for migrant landowners in conditions that kept them trapped in poverty, almost like slavery. Although it is generally believed that migration drives economic growth in the region, the benefits have largely bypassed the tribal populations. This has only widened social inequalities, as these communities have been systematically excluded from the new economic systems and opportunities.

Large-scale migration shifted the demographic balance in the tribal regions of Wayanad. As the migrant population grew, they gained more political and social influence, often pushing tribal communities into the background. The needs of the tribal populations were overshadowed by those of the migrants. This demographic change led to the political marginalization of indigenous people. Before strict implementation of political reservation as outlined in the Constitution, they either lost representation or had token representation in local governance. Even today, the *Paniya* and *Adiya* tribes remain among the most politically disadvantaged groups in Wayanad, which affects their ability to assert their rights to land, resources, and cultural preservation.

The migration from Travancore also introduced new religious and social structures, though on a smaller scale, among the *Paniya* and *Adiya* tribes. This further complicated the social dynamics in tribal areas. Christian missionaries from migrant communities attempted to convert indigenous tribes, leading to mixed reactions—some converted, while others resisted. The resistance stemmed from a fear of losing their traditional beliefs and social structures. Hindu religious groups took advantage of this fear, embedding themselves in tribal customs and beliefs, even though these had little in common with Hindu practices. These conversion efforts, along with counteractions, caused internal divisions within the tribal communities, weakening their social unity and reducing their ability to resist outside exploitation.

The economic activities of migrants have led to environmental damage, impacting the health and well-being of tribal communities. Deforestation, pollution, and changes in food and lifestyle have disrupted the traditional way of life for indigenous people, especially their dependence on natural resources for food, medicine, and shelter.

Additionally, with the introduction of new diets and lifestyles, tribal communities now face health problems such as malnutrition, alcoholism, and diseases that were previously unknown in their isolated regions. Wayanad's tribal areas have also become hotspots for sexual exploitation by outsiders, with Thirunelly once having the highest number of unmarried mothers in India.

Migration has had a profound impact on the indigenous tribal populations of Wayanad, especially the *Paniya* and *Adiya* tribes. While migrants claim that their arrival brought economic development and infrastructure improvements to the region, the benefits have largely favored migrant communities. In contrast, indigenous tribes have become more vulnerable to exploitation, cultural loss, and political marginalization. Their traditional ways of life, economic independence, and cultural identity have been greatly diminished, if not entirely lost. Issues such as poverty, modern forms of slavery, and social exclusion are once again emerging. The relationship between migrants and indigenous tribes is marked by power imbalances, with migrant communities holding the majority of economic, social, and political advantages.

Conclusion

Migration has deeply reshaped the socio-economic, cultural, and political landscapes of Wayanad. The agrarian migration from Travancore, alongside other waves of settlers, introduced new agricultural systems and modern economic practices that drastically altered the region's traditional way of life. While migrants often benefited from these changes, the indigenous tribes like the Paniya and Adiya suffered significant losses. They were displaced from their lands, forced into marginalized labor roles, and subjected to cultural erosion.

Although migration led to some infrastructure development and economic growth in the region, these benefits were largely limited to the migrant populations. The tribal communities, in contrast, faced exploitation and alienation, losing control over their lands and their cultural identity. Their political marginalization and social exclusion persisted even as new forms of education and religious practices were introduced by the migrants, further entrenching inequalities.

Despite claims that migration liberated tribal populations from oppressive systems, the reality is that it reproduced and perpetuated new forms of social and economic exploitation. The situation in Wayanad reflects broader historical patterns of power imbalance, where marginalized communities are often left behind as others progress. The long-term impacts of migration on Wayanad's tribal communities are complex, but the overall effect has been one of deepening social and economic divides.

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