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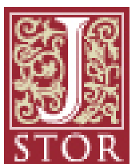

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Adivasis, Communists, and the rise of indigenism in Kerala

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Abstract Although the notion of the 'adivasi' has come under academic scrutiny and the 'dark side' of indigeneity discourses is increasingly criticized, there has been relatively little attention to the question of *why*, under adverse circumstances, activists have nevertheless started articulating their political program in the language of adivasi-ness while surpassing the particularistic politics of earlier tribal movements. Explaining the emergence of indigenist politics as a new democratic force is all the more pertinent for the case of Kerala since this state has the Communist movement as an obvious alternative for the articulation of such a transformative political agenda. This article therefore seeks to explore the forces that gave rise to the politics of indigenism. It begins with a discussion of shifts in the structural power context shaping subaltern activism in Kerala—particularly the impact of neoliberal restructuring and the new ideological environment created with the demise of the Communist block. The paper then moves to consider the political dynamics operating *within* this structural context that led indigenist activists to form a separate political movement. It looks particularly at the sense of both ideological and material disillusionment these activists feel toward the Communist party in Kerala.

Communist ideology became a popular force in Kerala in the years leading up to independence, culminating in the victory of the Communist party in the first democratic elections of the state in 1957. Ever since, Communism has set the agenda of the Left in Kerala and received the support of a majority of Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe voters (Thachil 2009). Yet in the course of the 1990s, a serious alternative to Communist ideology has started emerging in the form of a

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movement focused on "adivasi" rights, which in 2001 came to be known as the "Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha" (AGMS). Analysts argued that the AGMS "for the first time created a forum outside the two political fronts [led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the Congress party] through which legitimate social needs could be expressed" (Chathukulam and John 2006: 198) and agreed moreover that it represented a "qualitatively different political practice" that clearly went beyond "the tribal question" per se (Sreekumar and Parayil 2006: 249). There was a lot of debate, consequently, on what had caused the rise of the AGMS. The general consensus seems to have become that it was the threat of neoliberalism intensifying an age-old struggle of adivasis against their dispossession. A closer examination, however, upsets this idea of simple historical continuity and forces us to confront the question of why adivasis have started to mobilize according to an ideology of *adivasi* belonging rather than along the most obvious leftist alternative for them, namely Communism.

The question why indigenism arose comes up firstly because there is a historical discontinuity in political organizing: many adivasi workers who are now with the AGMS used to be involved in Marxist-inspired movements. Before organizing as 'adivasis', the Adiya, a 'Scheduled Tribe' heavily involved in the AGMS, were only marginally part of the traditional local "tribal solidarity movements" in their area, as these almost exclusively enrolled land-owning tribes such as the Kurichias (see Mathur 1977: 193ff). Many Adiyas instead were involved in the Naxalite movement of the late 1960s in Kerala. A. Varghese, the young Naxalite leader who is remembered as taking a genuine interest in the lives of Adiya workers and who was killed by the police in 1970 while fighting for their cause, is still strongly revered by them (see also Aiyappan 1992: 59ff; Mathur 1977: 199; Jacob 2006: 82). He enlisted hundreds of Adiyas into the CPI(ML) union, and interviewing some of them, I discovered a strikingly detailed collective memory of the Naxal-led strikes in which they participated to receive higher wages, paid in *cash* rather than in kind. Other activists now leading the AGMS used to be part of the CPI(M) in the 1980s. C K Janu, the Adiya woman leading the AGMS, was introduced to political activism by her uncle, P K Kalan, a well-known CPI(M) member. It was through the CPI(M)'s agricultural laborers' union, still active in the area, that she gained her initial political experience. Moreover, a host of non-parliamentary Communist splinter groups such as "Porattom" and the "Adivasi Vimochana Munnani", though less influential than the AGMS, exist side-by-side with it today. Why by the turn of the century so many adivasi activists had started articulating an 'autonomous' *adivasi* agenda is thus something to be explained, rather than assumed as the only political option.

A second reason why the rise of indigenism cannot be taken for granted is that the dominant notion of 'adivasi-ness' is often not something with which the rank and file of the AGMS spontaneously identify. "Adivasi? That's just something the government calls us. We're actually Paniya", is what a Paniya woman (another "Scheduled Tribe" of agricultural workers) told me. Another told me, "I don't know what it means, adivasi, but I know Kurichias [a generally wealthier Scheduled Tribe] are not adivasis because they are not like us, they are not poor". Many ordinary Paniyas and Adiyas described poverty rather than their 'adivasi' identity as

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defining their lives. Taking up the governmental category of "Scheduled Tribes"—the "tribal slot" (Li 2000)—and thereby uniting with communities such as the Kurichias who tend to treat Paniyas as if they were untouchable, was a rather unexpected development, not without its contradictions. When participants in a land occupation organized by the AGMS were urged by their leaders to give up Christian or Hindu rituals and worship only their "traditional 'adivasi' gods", some people were indignant—one Paniya participant told me "I can tell you, it was suffocating, I feel more comfortable living here with these Christian *nattukar*[1] than with those adivasis". The most bizarre response I heard when enquiring whether someone was adivasi was when I visited a community of Kunduvadians who were lobbying to become re-accepted onto the ST list: "We are not adivasis anymore, but we hope we will soon again be," they told me. Even C K Janu, the leader of the AGMS, at one point told me that what set adivasis apart was simply that "adivasis are on the ST list, Dalits are on the SC list". Adivasi identity was thus not something that was always already organic to AGMS participants. Those people most active in the movement, namely adivasis from agricultural workers' communities, often had to borrow symbols of dominant "adivasi-ness" that they had absolutely no affiliation with, such as the Kurichia bow and arrow represented in the AGMS flag (see figure 1: flag of the AGMS). The discursive construction of adivasi identity frequently even threatened to work against "adivasis-as-proletarians" (Baviskar 2005; see also Shah 2007; Whitehead 2007), and it is therefore all the more surprising that it became a central ideological concern of their politics.

A final reason to ponder the rise of the popular political usage of adivasi-ness is that it is unclear when in time the line should be drawn to decide who are the "first people" of an area. Historical studies cannot decide whether the Paniyas and Adiyas were the "first people" living in Wayanad, the hilly north-eastern area in Kerala where most of them they live now. What studies tell us instead is that these groups used to be slaves (see Mathur 1977, Aiyappan 1992) and usually worked for Nair (Kshatriya) landlords, who generally owned Wayanad's forest lands (Menon 1994). The word 'Adiyan' actually means 'slave' in Malayalam and the word 'Paniyan' stems from *panni*, meaning work. Though we do know that Paniyas and Adiyas at least lived in Wayanad before the Christian settlers who moved there from southern Kerala during the post-WW II and 1960s migration waves, the notion of indigeneity claimed by the AGMS even if interpreted in this sense is not logically consistent. It does not include the Chettys, an group considered indigenous to Wayanad, who used to employ many Paniya on their land but are not considered 'adivasi'. Academic studies focusing on the colonial construction of social categories in India have moreover thoroughly destabilized the presumed association of indigeneity with tribality (see e.g. Beteille 1998; Guha 1999) and shown that the notion of "the tribal" has actually been used "largely as a dustbin category into which is thrown all that is unorthodox and non-Hindu" (Bates 1995: 117). It is almost impossible for

[1] *Nattukar* probably translates best as 'plains men', as opposed to *kattumanushyar*, 'forest people'. The latter term is hardly ever used anymore however, and the former is usually translated into English as 'natives', since *nattu* can also just mean 'place' and *nattukar* thus 'those who belong to the place'. It is particularly ironic, and frustrating to activists in the AGMS, that thereby over time the settlers who moved into adivasi areas have in fact come to be called the "natives" of these areas.

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Fig. 1 AGMS flag

some groups, notably the Paniyas (see Aiyappan 1992), to argue they are 'tribal' in its usual sociological meaning. Many anthropological studies of tribes in South India claim the difference between caste and tribe makes little empirical sense (e.g. Morris 1982: 55). All this, again, demands an explanation of why regardless of these problems with the applicability of the notion of 'adivasi' identity, it nevertheless came to form the core of a new wave of political protest in Kerala.

Before answering the question of the rise of indigenism, I must start by giving a more detailed analysis of the political path of the AGMS in order to demonstrate that its activists' engagement with "adivasi-ness" is more than the simple strategic capitalization of dominant legal frameworks for short-term benefits or for the preservation of the status quo, which we find with earlier tribal movements. To emphasize this broader political agenda of the AGMS, which equips it with a vision that is transformative and historical—as is its rival, the ideology of Communism—I call this type of politics "indigenism". It follows from my understanding of indigenism that age-old suppression, intensified by neoliberalism, is an insufficient explanation for its rise. To answer the question of why activists started formulating their political agenda in terms of indigenism, rather than Communism, I firstly explore shifts at the level of what Eric Wolf called "structural power"—those relations of power that shape the setting in which political struggle takes place. In particular, I look at economic shifts as well as changes in the international political scene during the 1990s that together produced an environment amenable to indigenist politics. I then move to a discussion of how the rise of indigenism was triggered concretely in terms of shifts within this context, at the level of "tactical" power relations, involving ideological polarization and the break-down of Communist paternalism.

From tribal politics to indigenism

Both adivasis and working classes, who tend to overlap, can engage in political programs from the far left to far right. For those politically identifying as "workers", a danger on the political right is that of fascism—for self-identifying "indigenous people" there is the "xenophobic shadow of indigeneity", usually called "nativism" (Clifford 2001: 483). On the left, in turn, we find socialism and indigenism, the former oriented towards overthrowing the dictatorship of capital,

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the latter geared toward undoing the effects of an expanding world system. Both these programs are broad and transformative, and this is precisely what distinguishes indigenism from traditional tribal movements: despite an emphasis on territoriality and local belonging, indigenism goes beyond local, exclusivist tribal concerns; and despite reference to historical belonging, it reworks historical legacies and resists the "return of the native" (Kuper 2003) that some anthropologists fear.

Beyond particularisms and exclusivism

In his discussion of present-day adivasi politics Dipesh Chakrabarty (2005: 240) notes that in contrast to traditional tribal politics, many tribal movements today operate in a more 'rhetorical' rather than strictly 'referential' register that increases in "use-value … in proportion to the decrease in … referential content". This applies to the AGMS. Concepts it employs, such as 'ancestral land', 'tribal way of life', and even the notion of the 'adivasi', are understood rhetorically, or politically, and make little sense as strict references to local realities. Chakrabarty seems to present this as a problem, but the ambiguity of indigenism can also be seen as its strength, allowing for a dynamic set of interpretations in which local specificities can become part, however uncomfortable sometimes, of wider frames of reference and where political vision overrides the short-term preoccupation with claiming benefits on the basis of an exclusive identity.

We can contrast the more dialectical agenda that characterizes indigenism with Surajit Sinha's definition of a "tribal solidarity movement" as "a self-conscious socio-political movement aimed at asserting political solidarity of a tribe or of a group of tribes vis-à-vis … non-tribals" (2002: 252). Indigenist movements such as the AGMS are different. They go beyond tribal solidarity per se to propose ideals that can function as the basis for broader social transformation. This stands in contrast to movements just over the border of Kerala, in Tamil Nadu, described by Cederlof and Sutton (2005: 161) as engaged in narrow lobbying and "exclusivist" politics, "centered upon the deployment of a proved membership of specific and reified identities" (2005: 161). The latter resembles the activities of "Wayanad Adivasi Sangham" in the 1960s and 1970s in Kerala (Mathur 1977: 193ff) which consisted mainly of Kurichias (one of the wealthier tribes in Kerala) and held a March in 1972 to demand tribals to be exempted from the land tax, educated unemployed tribals to be given employment, and protective measures against "non-tribal settlers" to be implemented (Mathur 1977: 193ff)—all demands pitting 'tribals' against 'non-tribals', restricted to a regional level, and focusing on maintaining the status quo rather than envisioning broader social transformation of relevance to other (adivasi) subaltern groups. Actions by the AGMS go beyond such defensive lobbying. The March organized in 2001 by what was then still called the "Adivasi—Dalit Action Council" (later to become the AGMS), which started off as a protest March against the starvation deaths that had occurred in Paniya colonies, did not begin by presenting a list of demands but by demanding attention to the anger people felt toward the political status quo. There was an explicit solidarity between adivasi and Dalit organizations behind the March and when, after crossing the whole of Kerala, it arrived in front of the Secretariat in Thiruvanathapuram, it

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managed to attract even more widespread support. Eventually this led to an agreement with the government to implement structural measures to redress the condition of landless adivasis.

Unlike the localized adivasi March in 1972, which was only about ensuring entitlements from the state and took adivasi identity for granted, the March in 2001 was a more radical, symbolic challenge to the status quo by a broader alliance of subaltern groups and their sympathizers. Of course, the historical break was not absolute. Many intellectuals continued to report on the struggle in the framework of "the tribal question". Ignoring any unconventional interpretations of the AGMS' mobilization, they claimed that because the AGMS diverted from making claims to ancestral land and was simply demanding "any" land, it had not been able to "link itself to a transformative politics" (e.g. Singh 2001: 25). The 'transformative politics' implied is, however, of the backward-looking kind that relies on the restoration of an imagined past. It is not transformative in the sense of proposing a vision of wider social reform. The AGMS is transformative precisely because it advocates a broader, more universally applicable agenda and suggests a reworking of the received wisdom on adivasi needs.

Reworking the past

The AGMS is not just instrumentally focused on interpreting and using past glories—engaging a retrogressive form of identity politics—but it also actively reworks cultural stereotypes and historical legacies attached to the idea of "adivasi-ness". This is particularly important as all indigenist movements, in basing their future on a specific interpretation of the past, run into the difficulty of having to negotiate the relations of power that shaped this past and its historiography. There is always a perilous colonial and racist history to adivasi-ness that indigenism tends to confirm but nonetheless tries to reverse. As Crispin Bates (1995: 104) argues "the concept of the "*adivasi*" is a product of orientalism" and of the way "India over the generations has been remade in the image invented for it by European colonialists". Yet indigenist activists engage with this concept differently from those adivasi leaders who merely "reinforce rather than contradict the prejudices directed against them" (Bates 1995: 103). What distinguishes indigenist movements is that stereotypes and prejudices are not simply recycled. A reliance on easily mobilized tropes of tribal 'innocence' and 'cultural uniqueness' instead generally gives way to a dialectical, contradiction-ridden reworking of such legacies and a confrontation with the problem of what Sissons (2005) calls "oppressive authenticity". Rather than performing an "adivasi" dance for Chief Minister A K Anthony on the occasion of their 2001 agreement, AGMS activists convinced the CM to join their dance. C K Janu, leader of the AGMS, does not appear in "traditional Adiya dress" but in the kind of sarees previously worn only by upper-caste women. When she attacks the consumerism of the Malayalee middle-class, she makes it clear this is a general social critique and not a justification for tribal poverty through the myth of their supposed "simple needs".

Having to organize, as historically marginalized groups elsewhere, "within, and also against, their own histories and their own cultures and simultaneously within

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and against the histories and cultures that others try so intensely to impose upon them" (Sider 2003: xiii), it is clear why the AGMS uses a 'rhetorical' rather than 'referential' register. It is within this light that the ambiguity of the AMGS between the two ideological extremes of what might be called an eco-indigenist and a dalit-indigenist reading of the past needs to be understood. The former appeals most directly to bourgeois imaginations of the noble savage but also has some popularity amongst adivasis themselves for its vindication of a previously despised lifestyle as a model for the world. The dalit-indigenist historical narrative in contrast sees adivasis and Dalits primarily as the inheritors of the supposedly caste-less, egalitarian culture historically prevalent in South India. Though eco-indigenism tends to prevail at the international level (see Sissons 2005; Ghosh 2006), Dalit-indigenist interpretations sometimes find their way to global forums too (see e.g. Bosu et al. 1993: 7): Dalit groups have repeatedly tried to be accepted to the UN Working Group on Indigenous People (Karlsson 2003).[2] Eco-indigenist tendencies work to downplay the role of Dalits in the AGMS but Dalit participation in the movement has always been of crucial importance. The person widely acknowledged as the "brains" behind the movement,[3] Geethanandan, is a Dalit and the first state-wide political actions by the movement were organized under the banner of the "Dalit-Adivasi Action Council"—it was only in 2001 that the movement renamed itself the Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha.

The broader, more flexible political agenda of the AGMS and its reinterpretation of past legacies relating to the notion of indigeneity distinguish it markedly from traditional adivasi politics. It is hence justified to call the movement "indigenist" rather than simply engaged in "tribal politics". The question that follows is why indigenism was preferred over other such broader political alternatives—notably that of Communism.

The rise of indigenism in global context

The rise of indigenism in the last quarter of the previous century is a global phenomenon. All over the world, from the Chiapas highlands to the Kalahari desert, from the rainforests of Indonesia to a city such as Barcelona, people have started publicly claiming an indigenous identity as the basis for political mobilization. The obvious starting point of exploring the reasons behind the rise of indigenism in Kerala is therefore to look at the impact of global processes: first, the political–economic changes associated with neoliberalism, followed by a consideration of changes in the international ideological landscape.

[2] It is not the first time in Kerala that those calling themselves "Dalit" today have engaged in the politics of indigenism. In 1929, for example, a then short-lived political initiative was undertaken by Cherumas, an ex-untouchable caste in Kerala, to be called "Adi Keraliyar", an identity meant to replace their caste stigma by a proud claim to being "the first settlers in Kerala" (Menon 1994: 85).

[3] Partly this is also because contemporary gender norms in Kerala make it commonly unimaginable that the "brains" of a movement could be those of C K Janu, an adivasi *woman*.

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Accumulation by dispossession and the demand for land

Since the late 1970s, global capitalism shifted from what David Harvey (2003) characterizes as the dominance of "expanded reproduction", where profits are derived from the intensification of production, to that of "accumulation by dispossession", which relies on the commodification of global commons—public institutions and social rights as well as communally-owned land and other natural resources. Struggles over land, the most literal 'green field' to be appropriated by global capitalism, intensified in most of India after it embraced economic 'liberalization' in the early 1990s and large areas of land were sold off to mining companies, big dam building increased apace, and space was cleared for Special Economic Zones. At the same time, labor relations were made even more 'flexible' and informal as state-controlled factories and farms were neglected or privatized. Many employers have been able to revert to the old colonial practice of hiring migrant labor even where local labor is abundant in order to reduce workers' bargaining power. As Jan Breman (1996) argues, these processes have led to the creation of a growing reserve army of labor in India that intensifies the downward pressure on wages. Such shifts in the dominant modes of capital accumulation lead to changes in the language and form of resistance as older forms become ineffective or unfeasible (Harvey 2003). As Gail Omvedt (1993: 307) observes, an important difference between the so-called "new" and older social movements is that "wage issues and conflicts of toilers with those who exploit them directly as owners of property play a relatively small role". Instead the primary issue is the fight against being dispossessed of land, social rights, or existing social ties, often framed as constituting a community's "culture" or "identity". When it comes to land, the notion of indigeneity is moreover a particularly apt discourse as it helps to emphasize people's historical and cultural bond to the land, which cannot be compensated simply by offering monetary compensation or promises of resettlement elsewhere (Ghosh 2005).

The ideological preoccupation of indigenism with land also has an attraction for the many landless "adivasis" who did not have enough (if any) land to live off in the first place. The indigenist appeal to these adivasis is more directly related to the flexibilization of capital that has turned migration into an ever more determining aspect of their working lives. For these landless workers faced with what Breman calls "the specter of absolute redundancy" (Breman 2007), the desire for land is a reaction to the pressure of being dispossessed of the promise of emancipation as worker-citizens. On the one hand land ownership is still a claim to being allowed the basis of "proper" citizenship, resonating with the rhetoric accompanying liberalization in India which moves away from "state protection and entitlement for the poor and vulnerable classes to a model of empowerment based implicitly or explicitly on property rights" (Rajagopalan 2004: 229f.). On the other hand, it is a more "autonomous" vision of empowerment: rather than being able to integrate in society through stable employment and secure rights to education, the ideal of owning a piece of land is that of no longer being dependent on such social institutions for one's emancipation and goes hand in hand with the many (often state-sponsored) "self-help" initiatives amongst subaltern populations.

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In Kerala, the rise of indigenism seems to be related primary to the declining possibilities of social integration. Where in the late 1980s, still about 40 percent of adivasi workers had more than 200 days of employment per year, in 2003, only four percent of them fell into this category (Aerthayil 2008: 69 ff.). From the late 1990s, many of the state-run cooperative farms set up in the 1970s to provide employment to adivasi laborers were collapsing under international competition combined with decreased state subsidies. How this facilitated the rise of indigenism is well-illustrated by the Sughandagiri cardamom project (founded in 1976) in Wayanad. When in 2001 it stopped paying out wages to its workers, the latter initially demanded that the state government step in and provide to them a minimum of four days of employment per week. Faced with a serious budget deficit, the government chose to listen to an alternative demand: to parcel up the estate land and distribute it amongst the workers, legitimized in a discourse claiming that the adivasi workers were its "original inhabitants" and would thus see their "ancestral land" restored to them. Soon after, adivasi workers elsewhere started to occupy the land of their disfunctioning plantations, leading to a series of land occupations in Wayanad framed in the discourse of indigenism. Some of the land occupations—notably that of Muthanga—were organized by adivasi workers outside of the government-run plantations. As local landlords were leasing land for ginger and banana cultivation over the state border, especially in Coorg, many adivasi workers had to migrate there in search of work. Most of them experienced the dismal working conditions at Coorg plantation and the stigma attached to them as places of sexual exploitation as particularly humiliating, excluding them both literally and metaphorically from proper Malayalee citizenship. The hope that such citizenship would at least be open to their children through public education was fading, moreover, with the growing importance of private schooling and the uprootedness of migratory work regimes. Being dispossessed of such possibilities of social integration, adivasi workers were favorably inclined toward the notion of starting an autonomous "adivasi" life on a piece of land to call their own.

Transnational networks

While neoliberal restructuring closed off existing possibilities for worker-citizen integration, the past decades have seen a profound change in the international ideological landscape. Since the main Communist parties in India were used to following a Stalinist line, the fall of "really existing socialism" came as a profound, demoralizing shock to party members. While the Communism-within-one-nation debacle had been distinctly less inspiring to leftists elsewhere—who hoped that its demise could lead to the revival of internationalist currents of socialism—its collapse nevertheless robbed them of a crucial wedge against the onslaught of neoliberalism. No longer could NGOs argue with Western donors that their more radical programs were meant to stall the "threat of Communism". In reaction, many NGOs started encouraging "privatization from below" and functioning in a manner that was seen to co-opt rather than support the leadership of popular resistance movements. Whereas in the 1960s and 1970s, many Western-funded projects in the global South had been driven by a vision of political solidarity and global

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citizenship, by the 1990s many "human rights" campaigns had switched to advocacy and the appeal to humanitarian compassion (Mamdani 2010). "Indigenous people" rather than "peasants" became a key concern of Western funders. NGOs such as Survival International stimulated a "return of the native", focusing on populations most amenable to being seen as "noble savages" and potential environmental stewards (Tsing 2007). It is under these circumstances that indigenous people's protest took on an increasingly "indigenist" stance, divorced from the notion of class struggle.

As the notion of indigeneity emphasizes a primordial past, it is often forgotten that it is only since the 1980s that there has been a global identification under the unifying category of 'indigenous people' and the emergence of a "global indigenous subject" (Karlsson 2003). Crucial in this process has been the establishment in 1982 of the UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations, whose annual two-week meetings are seen more than any other gathering as "responsible for the coalescing of an international indigenous identity" and "encouraging the development of a global 'imagined community'" (Niezen 2003: 46). Initially, it was only groups in settler nations in America and Australia who identified as 'indigenous', but during the 1990s the definition of 'indigenous' used by the WGIP broadened to include all kinds of marginalized groups from Africa and Asia. Encouraged to seek special rights rather than general social rights, indigenous rights are attractive to minority groups since they form the only international framework that is potentially legally binding (Kymlicka 2007). The first indigenous delegates from India, representing the newly established Indian Council of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples (ICITP), started to participate in WGIP meetings from 1985 onward (Karlsson 2003: 407), challenging the government's claim that no distinction between 'indigenous' and 'non-indigenous' people existed in India.

In Kerala, of particular influence were the National Front for Tribal Self-Rule and the South Zone Adivasi Forum. The latter was established in the process of organizing a large 'Adivasi Sangham' in 1992 to join the international protest against the 'discovery' of America by Colombus 500 years ago and the colonization and extermination of indigenous people that followed (Cheria et al. 1997). In March 1998, C K Janu was funded by one of the largest indigenous rights organizations, the International Working Group for Indigenous Affairs, to present a paper at the "Asian Indigenous Women Conference" in Thailand. Subsequently, a version of her presentation was published in *Indigenous Affairs*, a prominent journal of the international indigenous people's movement. These platforms notably reinforced the essentialization of adivasis as entirely distinct from other communities and "part of nature" that was part of the (post-) colonial production of knowledge on "tribes". Influences of these discourses promoted in her international tours linger on in C K Janu's wording of certain political problems. She even used the English word "identity" to describe the main preoccupations of her movement to me. Yet C K Janu also participated in explicitly leftist international tours, notably in the Inter-Continental Caravan organized by Global People's Action, a direct-action oriented alliance. After the international tours C K Janu made in the late 1990s, she moreover broke off all ties to international networks as the AGMS was coming under a storm of accusations, fed by Communist and Naxal rivals of the movement, of being

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"foreign funded", "manipulated by foreign agents", and supposedly enriching its leaders over the backs of "poor adivasis". Hence, whereas general trends in the international ideological landscape certainly stimulated the turn towards indigenism in Kerala, such influences were mostly of an indirect nature. To observe the more direct reasons for activists like C K Janu to turn away from Communism and toward indigenism, we need to take a closer look at local history and the actual political debates taking place within Kerala.

The indigenist break with Communism

If we look at struggles going on at what Eric Wolf called the "tactical level"—i.e., *within* the political setting shaped by larger structural processes—the main reasons indigenist activist themselves give for why they started to organize 'autonomously', apart from the existing Left, invariably boil down to their disillusionment with the Communist party. An explanation of why indigenism became the new language in which social conflicts are addressed in Kerala is therefore not complete without a discussion of the actual clash of opinion between indigenist activists and the Communist party, which I offer by exploring the ideological polarization that took place and the breakdown of Communist political paternalism.

Ideological polarization

At the level of the leadership of the AGMS and the CPI(M) in Kerala, strong ideological disagreements have developed, particularly concerning the interpretation of the political history of Kerala and on the strategic question of the basis of cooperation among subaltern groups. According to the Communist party, the lens through which the 'caste question' and the 'tribal question' ought to be historically interpreted is that of the "scientific" study of "stages of development". This perspective allowed Communist leader EMS Namboodiripad to acknowledge the progressive role not just of the caste reform movement of the early twentieth century in Kerala but even of his own caste, the highest in the traditional hierarchy in Kerala. This was achieved by claiming that upper-castes had introduced the more developed modes of production and family relations of a caste society to the "pre-feudal" civilization of early Kerala (Namboodiripad 1984: 25 ff.; see also Menon 2006: 45). Feudalism was the next stage to be overcome and for that the Communist party was to follow a "genuinely secular stand" (Namboodiripad 1984: 3), including an "uncompromising struggle against caste oppression", whereby the party "dissociates itself completely from caste and communal separatism" (ibid: 4) and is "firmly set … against any attempt on the part of the scheduled and backward castes … to separate their people from the mainstream of the people's movement for freedom, democracy and socialism" (ibid.). The "alarming tendency" (Surjeet 2000) of increasing non-class-based political organizing in the course of the 1990s was noted by the party. Concentrating on the threat of "fascist" parties, particularly the BJP, an increased effort was made to bring the CPI(M) program "in tune with changing times" by addressing the problem of "casteism" with renewed energy

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(ibid.). It was argued that "while recognizing the genuine aspirations of the oppressed castes and their question for equality, and while striving to create the material basis for this equality through land reforms and other pro-people measures, the party has to expose and fight every attempt to put one caste against another, and protect and strengthen the unity of the toiling people of all creeds, castes, ethnic and linguistic groups" (Surjeet 2000).

Whereas the unity of the "toiling masses" against "communal forces" is the Party's emphasis, it has made some concessions on the question of the strategic alliance between subaltern groups. Recent party documents have started using the term "Dalit" and praising their "growing consciousness" but continue to warn of "some Dalit organizations and NGOs who seek to foster anti-communist feelings amongst the Dalit masses and to detach them from the Left movement" (CPI(M) resolution Feb 22, 2006), advising that "such sectarian and ... foreign-funded activities must be countered and exposed". In practice, almost all Dalit as well as adivasi organizations are considered sectarian and stigmatized as "foreign-funded". Even P K Kalan, Communist party member and C K Janu's uncle, believed there were imperialist forces behind the AGMS who are out "to destroy communism and prevent it from spreading all over India". They thereby echo official party documents alleging the AGMS was initiated "under Congress patronage" in reaction to the fact that CPI(M) and KSKTU (the CPI(M)' farm labor union) were "making strides in adivasi areas" (Backer 2002).

When it comes to the "tribal question" as such, the party has made further concessions to absolute "unity". It used to be the KSKTU that took up issues of tribal livelihood but after the formation of the AGMS, the CPI(M) reconsidered its position and launched a separate Communist organization for adivasis, the Adivasi Kshema Samithi (AKS). This was legitimized by the claim that "these organisations of Adivasis cannot be counted simply among the caste organisations as the Adivasis are far removed from the traditional caste-divisions" (Kerala State Committee of the CPI(M) 2003, par. 15) and because "the KSKTU alone could not succeed simply because all adivasis are not engaged in agriculture" (Backer 2002). But these arguments apply problematically to groups such as the Paniya and the Adiya, who are not at all "far removed from traditional caste-divisions" and often *are* engaged in agriculture. The Communist party line regarding these groups still vies against their separate organizing. In this respect they follow the tendency in Communist parties worldwide to regard only the most visibly "tribal" groups as having a particular historical identity whilst treating all other subaltern groups simply as "the lowest rung of the proletarian ladder" (Boughton 2001: 16).

Indigenist activists strongly disagree with the CPI(M)'s interpretation of history and strategic line. Rather than having radicalized lower-caste movements into a united democratic front, they see the hegemony of the Communist party as having skillfully manipulated and thereby destroyed the early twentieth century movements against caste. Under an anti-caste rhetoric, many indigenist activists now believe, upper-caste privileges were strengthened and a genuine revolt against the caste system quelled (Devika forthcoming)—as C K Janu says "in the olden days people were slaves to feudal lords, all that has changed it that now they have become slaves of politicians instead". For Geethananden, another of the AGMS leaders, it was

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precisely the "caste question" that caused him to disband the CPI(ML) group he led and search for alternatives that he saw as more suitable to Indian historical reality and that did not celebrate the Brahminical imposition of caste as a progressive historical development. In the Communist theory of historical stages of development, activists like Geethanandan now see an anti-Dravidian manipulation of history (see also Menon 1994) covering up the unjustifiable, violent subjugation of the original Dravidian people, the predecessors of Dalits and adivasis. According to C K Janu, what is perhaps the most important achievement of the AGMS is that rather than accepting the idea that their way of life is "backward", "now we say in fact everybody should follow adivasi culture, for the good of the world".

Indigenist activists reject the "concerted attempt by secular-liberal and left-wing parties and intellectuals to set up a secular versus communal polarity" and to call for absolute unity in reaction to the emergence of Hindutva as a powerful political force in the 1990s (Menon and Nigam 2007: 54). Although all indigenist activists I spoke to forcefully rejected the politics of Hindutva, they refused to be cajoled into giving up community organizing under the idea that all politics that is critical of the dominant "secular" approach is necessarily "communal". This ideological deadlock became intensified as the CPI(M) in Kerala forcefully rejected Dalit and adivasi organizations and what is called "identity politics" (*swathwa rashtriyam*). During the elections of 2006 this attitude even drove indigenist activists to make strategic alliances with Congress, which ironically was more eager to accept adivasis as equal partners in dialogue than the Communist party seemed to be. This, in turn, reinforced the idea among Communists that organizations such as the AGMS were unprincipled and "communalist". The reason that indigenist activists strongly believe in the need for autonomous organizing is that they see the lack thereof as precisely the historical error made during the Communist movement in Kerala, evidence of which lies in the fact that the agricultural workers who joined tenant farmers in their struggle received only "welfare" and were bypassed when it came to redistributing productive assets, notably land (Devika forthcoming). There is a general consensus therefore among indigenist activists that the adivasi and Dalit groups that mobilize together for social change should continue to emphasize their particular background, although in a language that would not stigmatize them or reinforce the caste system. For this reason the notion of Dalit and adivasi 'nation-building'—interpreted through the teachings of leaders such as Ambedkar and Ayyankali rather than through the experience of India's North-Eastern tribal states—has become popular in Kerala. In the dynamic of ideological polarization, as Communist politicians refuse to open up to the idea of recognizing any "divisive" historical and contemporary adivasi and Dalit cultural assertions, some indigenist activists even go to the extreme of arguing for the creation of autonomous governance structures and turning their 'ancestral land' into separate territories.

The breakdown of paternalism

Beyond ideological disagreements, at the level of the rank and file of the AGMS, it seems that the initial impetus for detachment from the Communist party arose from the belief that the party itself had become detached from the concerns of "the poor".

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A sense of betrayal can be found among rank and file activists of the trust that existed at some point in the benevolent and materially consequential paternalism of the party. In time this feeling has even developed into a radical rejection of all political paternalism, to be replaced by the assertion of Dalits and adivasi identity.[4]

In official Communist Party statements—as well as in the everyday talk of party members—there is often an almost automatic assumption that the active agent of political change is one not belonging to a subaltern group. Thus we read of the "need to uplift the tribals" and prevent the "weaker sections" of becoming alienated from the party (Kerala State Committee of the CPI(M) 2003, par 28) and hear party members talk of the "self-sacrificing" efforts of Communist leaders to reform Dalits and adivasis whose experience is almost invariably relegated to one of pure "pain, oppression, poverty and violence" (Menon and Aditya: 101). Clearly, a certain degree of "alienation" always seems to have existed between Dalit and adivasi followers of the Communist party and its mainly upper-class and to a large extent upper-caste "vanguard". The latter, it seems, were in solidarity with the party's mass base *only* if "the masses" continued to play their role as perpetual "victims". During the hey-days of the Communist movement for land and wage reform in the 1960s in Kerala, paternalism was a step in line with the caste reform movements of the early twentieth century that just preceded the rise of Communism and a step away from the crude caste oppression that once made Swami Vivekananda call Kerala a "lunatic asylum" of caste. This paternalism therefore used to be strategically tolerated by adivasi and Dalit participants in the Communist movement. Though they did not benefit equally from land distribution as the tenant farmers did, their alliance to the wider Communist movement did often bring them legal ownership of the plot of land on which their huts stood, the provision of decent social housing, the enforcement of a minimum wage, universal health care and education, food rations as well as a certain sense of dignity and progress. Soman, now a participant in the AGMS but previously allied to the Communist party, told me in an interview of how he came to believe in the Communist party after Communist members came to his family when his father had been badly beaten up by the police during a strike for higher wages. "Nobody had cared to come to us before to try and educate us like that…". With the concrete gains made through the Communist movement—the access to education, the *pukka* houses that were built by the Communist government, the fact that women could go to hospital to give birth—the paternalism of its leaders was appreciated as a sign that adivasi workers were no longer shunned as out-castes. As in the course of the eighties material progress seemed to stagnate for communities like Soman's and their situation even started deteriorating in the 1990s—houses collapsing because they were worn out, running water being privatized and thus no longer universally accessible, community land being fenced off for private developers—the continued paternalist rethoric of the Communist party started to be interpreted in quite a different light. It was only among actual Communist party members, who could still benefit

[4] Apart from Dalits and adivasis, it is particularly also women who now feel betrayed by the Communist Party—similar to Dalits and adivasis, their material standards of living are better than in the rest of India but this has not prevented intense forms of patriarchal control.

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personally from this enviable status, that I still found a benevolent interpretation of paternalist leadership. Amongst others, such as Soman, their frustrated desire for continuing progress translated instead into a sharp criticism of the Communist party and its paternalism. Maren, an adiya activist of the AGMS, skeptically remarked to me "they're always talking of their love (*sneeham*) for us adivasis ... but they don't love us at all, they hate us—they only love our ancestors, those who were too afraid to come out of the forest". Together with a rejection amongst adivasi workers of the myth of being "loved" came a resistance against the language of the Left that constantly emphasized their pathetic condition. Api, the independent leader of a land occupation by adivasi workers, started telling me "Political parties are all the same nowadays, they just treat us like vote banks...". But when a Christian auto-rickshaw driver listening in on the conversation added, "Yes, you are being exploited...", Api immediately retorted "Why say they exploit us? They can't just exploit us! If they don't deliver, then we will simply join a different party".

The general critique of paternalism amongst politically active adivasi workers has lead to a rejection of any kind of leadership by others than "adivasi" politicians, which decisively distances them from the Communist leadership. Whereas many Communist members continue to emphasize what is, in their eyes, a lack of ideological commitment of the indigenist leadership and circulate rumors about their corruptness, these kind of rumors end up being interpreted as positive achievements by indigenist activists. I was surprised at the response of some landless AGMS activists to my queries about the veracity of allegations that C K Janu had made a windfall of the AGMS. I have seen C K Janu living in a small house in an ordinary adivasi workers community and spending time away from her leadership activities to work in the field to make ends meet. The obvious response hence might be to deny such rumors but instead these adivasis said: "So what? That's great! Finally one of us is also getting rich". With the break-down of benevolent paternalism, a more explicit identification on the basis of community identity rather than class has followed. This even extends to how some activist adivasis interpret their sometimes continuing loyalty to the Communist party. Whereas the CPI(M) liked to call the election result in 2006, in which the AGMS received only few votes, as "an outright rejection of the newly formed 'independent' organizations of framers and tribals like ... A*divasi* Gothra Saha (led by C.K. Janu) by the electorate" (George and Krishnaprasad 2006: 82), many AGMS participants themselves interpreted it as a bargaining of adivasis with the CPI(M): with the rise of the AGMS, they had shown the party that it had to take them seriously and that they would only be willing to give them their votes in return for concrete results. They were giving the party a chance to honor its commitments but their loyalty was strictly conditional. In this sense, as C K Janu emphasized, "any success made by the AKS in getting adivasis land, is a victory for adivasis and thus our [the AGMS'] victory". Such statements were not just coming from the AGMS leadership. In one paniya community that had been involved in AGMS activities, all inhabitants voted for the person from their own colony during the 2006 municipal elections. They were a minority in the municipality and therefore did not gain political power from it but they explained to me that "this is not the point", "they did not deliver their promises to us so we decided we will show them that we

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can withdraw our votes. They will only receive adivasi votes if they fulfill their promises".

Conclusion

If we go beyond the idea that contemporary adivasi resistance is simply the logical historical continuation of an age-old struggle against colonial oppression and are instead sensitive to the broader transformative vision and reworking of stereotypical notions of 'adivasiness' that are proposed by movements such as the AGMS, the question becomes pertinent why this shift from a discursive emphasis on 'class' to the assertion of 'identity' took place. This paper has tried to answer this question at two levels. Firstly, I looked at the more structural changes that Kerala became part of in the course of the 1990s. I discussed the political-economic restructurings that led land rights to become a top priority of subaltern groups and made struggles for employment and wages less likely. The influence of shifts in the general ideological landscape were explored, with particular attention to international NGOs. The second level at which the question of the rise of indigenism was addressed was the more directly experiential level of indigenist activists' political decisions, in which I argued that their disillusion with the Communist party has played a major role. The latter was expressed both in terms of an increasing ideological polarization between indigenist activists and Communists in their interpretation of Keralese history and in terms of the breakdown of the material reality of benevolent paternalism of the Communist party.

The experience of disillusion with the Communist party and the rise of an alternative agenda in the form of indigenism is particularly pronounced in Kerala and often intensively emotionally experienced. It is also, however, a global phenomenon. Around the world, those "forms of left-wing political organization established in the period 1945–1973 … [became] inappropriate to the post-1973 world" (Harvey 2003: 172). Generally the traditional left was unable to change adequately, leading insurgent movements to embark on a different political path, in some instances quite hostile to socialist politics. In reaction to the excesses of such hostility, there is now a growing body of work that critically analyzes the "dark side" of indigenism (Shah 2007), demonstrating that it tends to lead followers straight back to the structures of oppression they sought to escape. In this paper I have tried to add to this body of work an analysis of where such "hostile excesses" may come from and the political spirals that produce them (see Steur 2010). I have moreover implicitly demonstrated that though identities other than "class identity" have become emphasized, there is at the same time a strong undercurrent in indigenist movements that seeks to create openings for class solidarity and social transformation of the kind that closely resemble the original ideals of the Left.

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