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***Managing Assets and Vulnerability Contexts:  
Vistas of Gendered Livelihoods of Adivasi  
Women in South India***

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## **Abstract**

In general, indigenous livelihoods are often adversely incorporated within development processes and policies on account of their multiple disadvantages and discrimination. The paper argues that the ability to build on or manage livelihoods is largely gendered, often exacerbated through the nuanced working of socio-economic forces as women's experiences of poverty should be located and deconstructed within the configuration of local, political, social and economic forces. Despite notable state led development initiatives in Kerala, the multidimensionality of deprivation among different groups of poor and women within these communities is yet to be seriously considered. Only then, responsive measures can be developed, that will bear any significant difference and meaning to a historically neglected social group. Their social, economic and political participation is important to develop responsive and specific policies and institutions in lieu of those that are designed on the basis of preconceived notions of 'modernisation' and 'homogeneity' of indigenous livelihoods.

**Keywords:** Gender, Poverty, Tribal, Livelihoods, Kerala

## Introduction

In common parlance, 'poverty' is synonymous with limited monetary and material resources, although recent discussions on causal explanations of poverty have focussed on human poverty. This includes a more dynamic approach looking at both tangible and intangible assets, nutritional status and indices of human deprivations that allows dignity and autonomy in life (Baulch 1996); substantive freedoms and capabilities/entitlements (Sen 1999). The multidimensionality of deprivation is of significance to understanding different types of poverty, as the patterns of poverty among indigenous communities are in many ways different to general poverty. While acknowledging that the definition of indigenous communities is largely problematic, indigenous peoples are seen to be disproportionately affected by poverty globally (Mcneish and Eversole 2006; Hall and Patrinos 2005). In all, these groups share basic similarities in histories through their relation to land (dis)possession and identities characterised by distinct social and cultural systems.

Indigenous communities in India largely referred to as Scheduled Tribes, form nearly 8 per cent of the total population. Henceforth, the term 'adivasi', meaning original inhabitant, will be used without any political connotations. Remaining outside the hierarchical varna or caste based system, adivasis have distinctive identities and cultural systems. Despite protection by the Constitution of India, they persistently remain the most backward ethnic group in India, reflected through important indicators of human capabilities (Singh 1993; Basu 1993). Mainstream development and modernisation initiatives through the commercial exploitation of adivasi land<sup>1</sup> and legislations such as the Adivasi Land Reform Act have in fact, adversely affected these communities (Singh 1993; Shah 2004). Thus adivasi livelihoods are entrapped in historical issues of contested land rights and exploitation. In this paper, the nature of gendered vulnerability context of adivasi livelihoods is examined and the argument is that the ability of adivasi livelihoods to expand and manage productive assets is gendered, further compounded as the vulnerability context triggers gendered vulnerability. The paper will attempt to adapt the livelihood framework to explore gendered dimensions of households. It will explore how the vulnerability context affects men and women differently. Section 1 outlines some of the issues in gendered human poverty while Section 2 looks at the state of adivasi population in India and in Kerala. Section 3 presents evidences based on gendered livelihood framework as a methodology to encompass gendered dimensions before proceeding to analyse findings from primary research. Some conclusions of the study are given in Section 4.

## 1. Gendered Human Poverty: The Evidence

Gender relations affect all aspects of poverty including income, opportunity, security and empowerment (World Bank, 2001; Narayan et al 2000), thus acting as both cause and characteristic of poverty. The thesis of feminisation of poverty has helped to bring out the nexus between gender and poverty in terms of its extent, incidence and trends (Jackson 1998; Cagatay 1998; Budowski 2003), where female headed households are seen to have higher incidence of poverty compared to men, or the incidence of poverty may be increasing over time (Lanjouw and Stern 1991; Jackson 1998). While it is important to include female headed households in assessing vulnerability, it is equally significant to address the different ways in which women experience poverty. Studies that challenge the concentration on the feminisation of poverty thesis based on female headship state that it is important to look at ways in which

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<sup>1</sup> Adivasis in South-Western Madhya Pradesh have faced multiple discrimination in the market oriented agricultural growth strategy (Shah, 2004), while the Garos of Northeast India have experienced erosions in women's rights, due to changes in cultivation practices, inheritance and customary laws (Agarwal 1994).

women in male-headed households also suffer poverty, which is multidimensional and 'multisectoral'-experienced in different ways, at different times and in different "spaces" (Chant 2003; Bradshaw 2002).

Women experience poverty and vulnerability in different ways. First, the linkages of gender and poverty is evident through basic human capabilities and social indicators as girls in poor families receive lower quality nutrition, less health care and poorer education (eg de Haan, A and Lipton 1998; Measham and Chatterjee 1999; Hulme et al 2004; Sen and Hulme, 2005). Further, the inter-generational effects on gendered human capabilities are evident (Kabeer, 2000; Klasen and Wink 2003; Schultze, 1998; Desai 1998). The mechanisms of cooperation and conflict within the household as well as the dynamics of bargaining the shape of the distribution of work, income and assets, are affected by social norms (Agarwal 1994; Kabeer 1994; Sudarshan and Bhattacharya, 2004). These gender roles and norms influence the inter-generational transfer of the various types of capital within households, through access and control (and often vulnerability). Secondly, the emerging body of evidence on 'duration' of poverty and its links to chronic poverty is linked to the ability (or vulnerability) to withstand risk of falling into the poverty trap (Hulme et al, 2001). For example, with persistent poor health outcomes after shocks in Ethiopia and Zimbabwe, Dercon and Hoddinott (2005) find that adult women are worse protected from shocks. Thirdly, it is harder for women to transform their capabilities into incomes or well being due to gender inequalities in relation to economic resources, gender biases in institutions, irrespective of the headship factor. The interaction of households with other economic and social institutions as gender inequalities in access to services and markets have been illustrated (Khandker, 1998; Hoddinott and Haddad, 1995; Agarwal, 1994; Harriss-White, 1998;1999; Quisumbing and Maluccio, 1999; Arun, 1999). Finally, in cases of transient poverty, such as economic crises, women work harder to maintain their households (Cagatay 1998). They are also time poor as they are engaged more in unpaid work such as reproductive and household tasks, and when in paid work their returns to labour are lower than men (Aliber 2001). It is important to point out that intra-household analyses have persistently concentrated on gender as the only axis of difference within the households, rather than their intersection with other aspects such as age, disability or relationship to head of household etc (Bolt and Bird, 2003). Women from different social groups and regions may experience multi-dimensionality of poverty, both in temporal and spatial terms. So the important question here is that in general if women face different experiences of poverty to men, then how do adivasi women experience poverty? Of course, any discussion of adivasi livelihood profiles is challenging, as they in many ways are irreducibly local in nature varying among geographical regions, type of tribe and socio-economic conditions, although there are recurring themes and patterns.

The pattern of the developmental process and the commendable social status of women in Kerala, the southern state of India have received much attention. With a long history of robust forms of public action and social movements such as agrarian movements, organised democratic mobilisations against social hierarchy, higher investment in social capabilities such as health and education sectors, effective land reforms, influence of leftist movements, unique matrilineal systems that circumscribed gender discrimination seen in other regions, have all transformed to a higher order of social development of its citizenry even with low economic growth<sup>2</sup>. Nevertheless, studies have questioned the validity of conventional social indicators for defining the status of women (eg Eapen, 2004; Devika 2005; Arun, 1999; 2002). Efforts to address gender concerns through Self Help Groups under the decentralisation initiatives were more successful in addressing the practical needs of women rather than their strategic needs, such as challenging patriarchal norms (Mukherjee and Seema 2000; SAKHI, 2004) and in many cases, women's participation has been more functionalist, as a conduit for implementation, rather than their empowerment (Muralidharan 2003).

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<sup>2</sup> Kerala's success is contributed to redistributive measures and welfare provisions (Parayil, 2000; Franke and Chasin, 1994); unique historical processes (Tornquist, 2000). Yet, concerns linger about its sustainability due to low economic progress, increased emigration and unemployment.

Thus the highly acclaimed success factors of the Kerala model actually lags behind in the case of the adivasi population. Persistent asset poverty, widespread hunger and ill-health and limited economic opportunities have led to widespread discontent and rising political activism among the adivasis, which confirm the adverse incorporation of these communities in the so-called Kerala model.

## 2. Adivasi Livelihoods in India and Kerala: An overview

While the claims on declining income poverty in India between 1973-74 and 1999-2000, as per the 55th National Sample Survey (NSS) data, is heartening, yet, this finding has been contested, not only in terms of methodology but evidences of spatial poverty traps and among the Scheduled Tribes, Scheduled Castes and women (Mehta and Shah 2003). Table 1 shows some basic indicators of capabilities of ST and general population of India and the state of Kerala in particular where the adivasi population forms 1.14 per cent of the state population. The decadal population growth rate of the adivasis for 1991-2001 is around 13.75 per cent, much higher than the state (9.45 percent). In India as a whole, the sex ratio of Scheduled Tribe has decreased from 982 to 978 during the last decade. Kerala is known for its sex ratio that is favourable to women (1058 females per 1000 males), while for the adivasis this is 1027, with an increasing trend during the last 3 decades. The share of the Below the Poverty Line (BPL) population among the adivasis decreased to 24.2 per cent in 1999 – 2000 from 37.3 per cent in 1993-94 (Table 1). While adivasis constitute 3 per cent of the total BPL population, their proportion of the ST population of the state is only 1.14 per cent. It implies that the incidence of poverty among the adivasis is about three times that of the total population of the state (GOK 2005).

**Table I: Selected Indicators of Adivasis in Kerala and India**

	Kerala		India	
	General	ST	General	ST
<b>Total ST Population (2001)</b>		1.1 %		8.2 %
<b>Sex ratio females \$ (2001)</b>	1058	1027	933	978
<b>Below-Poverty Line (50<sup>th</sup> Round NSSO)</b>	25.5 %	37.3 %	37.1 %	52.2 %
<b>(55<sup>th</sup> Round NSSO)</b>	9.4 %	24.2 %	27.1 %	45.8 %
<b>Literacy Rates</b>	89.8 %	57.2 %	52.2 %	29.6 %
<b>Work Participation rates +</b>	50.4 (15.3)	55.14 (36.9)	51.9 (25.7)	53.2 (44.8)
<b>Rural (NSSO 55<sup>th</sup> Round \$)</b>	572 (221)	721 (408)	558 (438)	558 (438)
<b>Urban (NSSO 55<sup>th</sup> Round \$)</b>	561 (198)	548 (471)	518 (108)	480 (204)

+ 1991 Census figures, presented in percentages

\$- Presented as number of persons per 1000, and includes usual principal status and subsidiary status.

Source: NSSO (2001); GOK (2005)

The literacy rate among the Scheduled Tribes in the state was 57.22 per cent, higher than the 29.60 per cent at national level in 1991 (Table I) but it is a matter of serious concern that the proportion of Scheduled Tribe Students in Higher Secondary section is just half (0.58%) of their population share. The higher work participation rates of the adivasi category are due to higher work participation rates of adivasi women which is 36 per cent compared to only 15.8 in the state while for male it is 55.14 and 47.58 for the state (GOK 2005).

The spatial concentration of adivasis is marked in Kerala with the district of Waynad accounting for 36 per cent of adivasis, while Idukki and Palakkad (mostly the region of Attapady) account for 26 per cent, therefore often subject to remote isolation and disadvantage (See Appendix Figure I). The number of adivasi families Below Poverty Line (BPL) in the whole of the state is only 2.7 per cent of the total 36.58 per cent, nearly 30.09 per cent of adivasi families in Waynad district are below the poverty line (GOK, 2003). Nearly 60.33 per cent of adivasis in Waynad are landless, while this figure for Palakkad is 24.44 per cent. The highest number of landless tribes is found in Waynad District with 60.32% of the total followed by Palakkad with 24.44 (GOK 2005).

Nearly two per cent of the total plan budget is spent on the welfare of tribal development in Kerala (GOK 2005). Some of the programmes, for example, the Special Component Plan, Tribal Sub-Plan are implemented through the local governments as part of the decentralisation measures introduced in 1996. The innovative poverty alleviation programme of Kudumbashree<sup>3</sup> that is based on community based women's organisations and setting up micro-enterprises to fight poverty is a notable programme in Kerala. In Attapady, the Attapady Hill Development Scheme (AHADS) is also working with the adivasi communities in the region.

Asset poverty as a major evidence of adverse incorporation of social groups, for example in South-Africa, legacies of colonialism and apartheid have systematically discriminated against the black communities in South-Africa leading them to live in manifestations of chronic poverty (Aliber, 2001) and have led to their 'adverse' incorporation in the development process (Du Toit 2004). The picture of adivasis is not different in Kerala. The adivasi population in Kerala, as in the national context, have in large been victims of adivasi land alienation, in many cases due to lack of appropriate evidence, rendering them assetless<sup>4</sup> (Kalathil 2004). Depleted of ancestral land, adivasi were reduced to landless labourers but the general crisis in the agricultural sector, and non-implementation of the Alienated Adivasi Land (Restoration) Act of 1975<sup>5</sup> has compounded the vulnerabilities of the adivasis. With increased demands for a settlement outside the Kerala Restriction on Transfer by and Restoration of Lands Bill of 1999, the state has witnessed widespread protests, political mobilisation and violence in the light of the struggles by the Adivasi Dalit Samara Samithi (ADSS) and the ensuing 'Muthanga' episode. Despite mobilisations and campaigns, for example, led by the Kerala State Karshaka Thozilali Union (KSKTU), the affiliate of All India Kisan Sabha, and the Adivasi Kshema Samithy (AKS), the Adivasi Welfare Committee, distribution of land is still a grave issue in the State. Further their social organisation also broke up due to land alienation as their subsistence depended on agriculture and being assetless, they were further denied of any infrastructural support or credit from institutions (Kalathil 2004). Notwithstanding a record of successful land reforms, pioneering decentralisation initiatives, the marginalised communities of Kerala have yet to fight for a decent livelihood, through an alternative front, quite removed from the established Right-Left domains in the state (RaviRaman, 2002).

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<sup>3</sup> Kudumbashree implements Urban Poverty Reduction programmes, eg, State Urban Development Agency (SUDA), Swarna Jayanthi Shahari Rozgar Yojana (SJSRY), Urban Self-Employment Programme (USEP) and Development of Women and Children in Urban Areas (DWCUA).

<sup>4</sup> Transactions were made without paying any price or at nominal prices through sale of commodities such as of salt, liquor and tobacco with or without their conscious concurrence.

<sup>5</sup> The Adivasi Land Act (1975) was largely a political response to the emerging radical *naxalites*, but over the years the Act is politically redundant (Kalathil 2004).

It is important the the processes, causes and consequences of deprivation and conflict be situated in the context of the specific configuration of the political economy, geography and history of the contexts in which they exist. This study is based on a triangulation of research methods comprising of survey, cases studies, in-depth interviews, focus group discussion and discourse analysis conducted during July 2004–March 2005 which is discussed next.

### 3. 'Gendered' Livelihoods- Evidences

The Sustainability Livelihood (SL) framework has been a popular tool to improve understanding of livelihoods particularly of the poor (Ellis 2000; Murray 2001) and often it is a useful starting to focus on 'what the poor have, rather than what they do not have' e.g. social capital and household relations (Moser 1998; Bebbington 1999; Carney 1999). Within a 'vulnerability context' defined for example by shifting seasonal constraints, short term economic shocks and longer term trends of change, people deploy five types of livelihoods assets or capital (asset pentagon<sup>6</sup>) in various combinations within circumstances influences by institutional structures and processes, in order to pursue diverse livelihood strategies with more or less measurable 'livelihood outcomes'. The orthodox pentagon has been modified, say, by dividing social capital into socio-cultural and socio-political capital and including power relations (Moser and Norton 2001) to understand gendered dimension of households and communities.

A number of adivasi groups exist in the state distinguished by ethnicity, historical origins and economic occupation. Four categories distinct in terms of cultural systems and ethnicities were chosen namely: landless labourers of Adiyas, (who worked as slaves, the term stemming from rules on social distance in a caste society, of ar-six; ad-feet, to avoid pollution,); forest based Kattunaikans (kadu- 'forest' nayakkan- 'leader'); wage workers Paniya, ('pani- working in coffee plantation as bonded labourers, distinctly dark skinned, long headed people, and short stature); settled cultivators, collectors of forest produce and weavers; Irulas (irul- dark)- found only in Attapady, originally from Tamilnadu, these groups have a narrow head and oval facial structure, engaged in agricultural labour and cultivation. The study areas consist of selected 'hamlets' from panchayats (local administrative unit, in total there are 991 in the state), of the adivasi dominated districts of Waynad and Attapady region in Palakkad. The selected panchayats are: Noolpuzha, Bathery, Manathavady, Mepadi, Nenmeni, Pulpally, Thirunelli, Poothadi and Thondakkadavu. In Attapady, Agali and Sholayoor Grama Panchayath were included. (Figure 1). A total of 165 households were included in the quantitative survey, comprising of 46 Kattunaikans, 18 Irulas, 27 Adiyas and 73 paniyas. Qualitative methods of interviews, case studies and focus groups were held, wherein a total of 38 women and 27 men were included.

The specific configuration of the local contexts, and the challenges involved in unravelling the power relations that exists should be acknowledged. First the specific nature of adivasi livelihoods and the challenges it poses for social research should be mentioned. Discourses and engagement with adivasi identity and lives constantly throw up issues of being and perceived as binaries of 'us' and 'them', where often non-adivasis were viewed as 'aliens' or 'outsiders', and in most cases, with suspicion and lack of trust. Interactions would prove much easier in adivasi areas where interventions by community organisations existed although caution was exercised not to bias research findings. Second, rigid classifications of households as unit of analysis was also challenging as a number of households for a 'hamlet' which in many cases consisted of close families, so as to blur divisions of household income, expenditure and assets. Rather than focussing on intra-household analysis per se, the study will attempt to conceptualise livelihoods that are based on interactions and relationships within the households, viewed as individuals and not just based on a unitary model, but which builds

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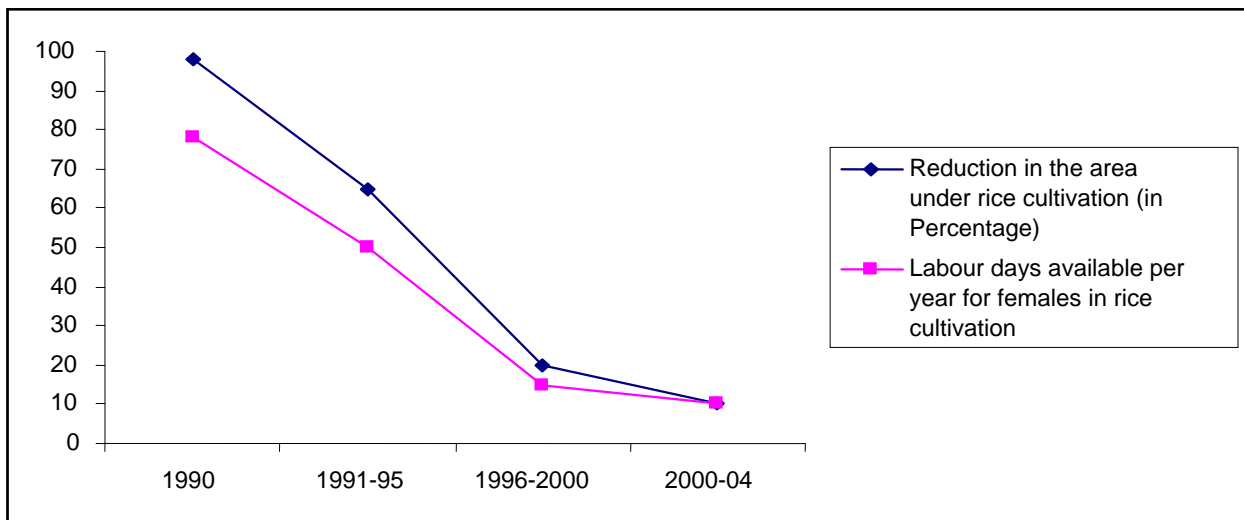
<sup>6</sup> This framework identifies five types of assets or capital upon which livelihoods are built which include human, social, financial, natural and physical capital and increasing access (ownership or rights to use) is important for the reduction of poverty.

on and includes other levels of interactions, such as a 'adivasi' woman in a heterogeneous 'adivasi' community (made up of hamlets) but also within intersections with the outside or 'alien' community. It is obvious from the account so far that the vulnerability context of adivasi livelihoods is set out in historical issues such as contested land rights and comparatively lower level of capabilities. Here we examine how this context is further exacerbated through wider changes which have affected adivasi livelihoods in general but women in particular in terms of economic and social forces.

### 3.1 Gendered Economic Vulnerability

Various economic changes in the state as a whole and in the selected regions have shaped the economic vulnerability context which includes changes in cropping pattern, modernization of agriculture practices, and seasonality of agriculture and market fluctuations for agriculture output which have affected both labour and wages. Agriculture wage labour, primarily in rice cultivation, has been the sole source of occupation of adiya and paniya women, in tasks such as transplanting, weeding and harvesting, for an average of 80 days per year. But with reduction in area under rice cultivation over the past 12 years, labour days have dropped from 78 days in 1990 to just 10 days during 2004. (Figure 2). With crops such as ginger and banana, more male labour is used. An increasing supply of migrant workers from the neighbouring states has resulted in a reduction in the demand for adivasis in general and women in particular. In specific, as the market price for coffee has come down, paniya women are no longer being employed. The changes in cropping pattern have not only decreased the number of working days, it has led to lowering of daily wages, i.e. from Rs. 90 to Rs.60 for women.

**Figure 1: Area under Rice and Total Female Labour Days**



Source: Fieldwork 2004-2005

The working season starts from December-February, with harvesting in the months of June-August. While employment in rice cultivation provides 48 days, ginger provides 23 days, banana provides 4 days, and coffee provides 43 days and pepper 22 days. No work is available during March and April and very few days i.e. less than 10 days in August- October. More than 15 days of work is available in the months of January, July, November and December. Changes in cropping patterns have not only reduced employment, it has changed the system of wage payment practised in rice cultivation. 'Pathambu' , a traditional practice of payment in



kind, i.e. rice as wages, has been followed during the harvesting season, common to Adiyas in the hamlets of Vemam and Orpally. Thus workers take home one seventh of the total yield which is divided among them. This method of grain payment is applied at two stages- field harvesting and manual processing. This provides financial relief to employers and ensures food security to workers (the surplus were often sold privately). This has given way to the wage system in most areas which has added to the food insecurity among these communities. All of these have led to the increased reliance on ration shops (Public Distribution System); reduction in consumption of food -from three to two meals per day; increased consumption of alcohol/betel leaves and prone to indebtedness.

In Attapady, economic opportunities for Irulas are different. In Nattakal Ooru of Sholayur Panchayat, work comprises of brick factories in the neighbouring region of Coimbatore; work through AHADS and broom leaf collection. Women get more opportunities through AHADS for small jobs like planting. However, such work is paid lesser - Rs. 100/- for men and Rs.70 for women than other areas where it is 120 and 80 respectively). With work for 10-15 days in an average month, one Irula women quotes - *"they are paying us less wages, but this saves us from starvation"*

### *Male Migration: Gendered outcomes*

As non-farm and farm income opportunities are both seasonal and irregular, adivasis from Muthanga, Thonikkadav and Thirunelli panchayats often resort to migrant work in the border state of Karnataka (eg Kudaku and Hassan districts). For the past 10 years, the rate of migration has been steadily increasing, consisting largely of male migrants (a small proportion of females also work in ginger cultivation). While these are pursued as livelihood strategies to find work and income, this also serves as an avenue for forced migration, exploitation and increased vulnerability. Firstly, incentives of food, supply of chewing materials and arrack (local liquor) are promised, despite relatively lower wages (ie Rs.50 for female and Rs.80 for male). They are picked from their hamlets with jeep/truckers, with advance payments for the family. However, in many cases the agreed amount is not paid, with no expenses met (sometime not even a return bus fare -many have walked back to their homes). Incidences of sexual exploitation of women workers by the employers and co-male workers in the work place are very common, so is the case of women left behind in the hamlets, the causes and effects will be detailed in the following section.

### *Social Vulnerability*

Of late, there has been an increased media attention to the sexual exploitation of adivasi women in Kerala, often into prostitution or abuse by state officials (Kalathil 2004). This was indeed corroborated with evidence seen in the study areas. Physically and financial exploitation at the work place is quite common, mostly among migrant workers as they are more vulnerable in a distant place. However, the most disturbing tendency is that school drop-outs girls are lured with promises of a better life and marriage by youth from 'outside' communities. In some cases, a short period of cohabitation is followed by abandonment. In most of these cases, there is no evidence of the men's personal details or place of origin. Often the victim and their families become silent victims of such exploitation and are denied justice within the formal practices of police or legal authorities. Nevertheless these abandoned women and children are accepted in their families and the larger adivasi community. It is however encouraging that in small number of cases, medial interventions such as DNA paternity tests has been used, and in these cases, compensation has been paid. However, humiliating procedures and questioning within a suspicious gaze often deters victims to register any formal case. Practices of dowry are also

increasing, which shows the influence of mainstream values, which has implications for gender relations and inequality.

Other triggers of vulnerability are manifold. Widespread consumption of alcoholism and chewing practices is common among adivasi communities, as a cultural and economic practice. Some of the comments of the respondents are important-

*“Chewing is a hereditary habit, right from our child hood, and continue throughout. While other children are interested in buying food, chocolates etc, our children buy betel leaves. We can live without food but we can’t survive without chewing.”*

Thus chewing is used to combat hunger, physical pain and frustration, although this is itself is a significant expenditure. In Kattikkulam hamlet, for a Kattunaikan household with 4 adult members, with average monthly income of the family of Rs 2250, one third of the income of this family is spent on chewing, by both men and women. Alcoholism is yet another exploitative factor<sup>7</sup> among adivasi men and women. More than 85% of the men spend more than 60% of their income on this<sup>8</sup>. Adivasi men are used as carriers (and often convicted) of illicit trafficking of liquor from Karnataka. Liquors are used as tools of exploitation as it is the main incentive for migrant work in ginger cultivation (where men and women and children are massively employed at cheaper labour cost). The field work phase was one of the periods of free rationing<sup>9</sup> (July-August), when all households relied on the ration (fair price) shops (through Public Distribution System), claiming that this was the only preventive mechanism against starvation. However complaints were rampant about the timings, quality and quantity<sup>10</sup> of such support. The government issues free ration mostly during the rainy months, but was stopped after the Onam festival, despite the next months being a lean period. Nevertheless, the dependence on ration shops has created a general cycle of dependency in these communities. So far, some of the drivers of social and economic vulnerability have been outlined. The general decline in the agricultural sector has hit these livelihoods the most as they are not insulated against shocks and risks, and often the vulnerability context is gendered.

### 3.2 Managing Asset Portfolio

Next, the basic asset portfolio of adivasis will be explored to outline interrupters of deprivation, how they manage various forms of capital, both tangible and non-tangible, and the factors that enable or disabling them to pursue viable livelihood options.

Tangible Assets: Dependency on natural resources such as land as a livelihood resource is important among indigenous communities, but so is land dispossession. Table II shows the ownership/control of some of assets, by type of adivasi and gender. Being dependant on wage labour, paniyas and adiyas have no or little ownership of land, although the household dwellings are seen as a natural asset. These are sometimes owned by women, in cases where the state has provided dwelling plots, for example (25 percent for adiyas and 50 per cent for paniyas). Living close to in forest lands, Kattunaikans do possess land resources, where women own 25 per cent of land compared to 23.1 of their men. But this ownership is not legally recognised, due to lack of ‘recognised’ title deeds and land dispossession. In all areas, the proximity of adivasi lands to forests makes them prone to attack from wild animals, thus constraining cultivation.

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<sup>7</sup> Gambling is common among youths, and fall into debt, this again promoted by outsiders.

<sup>8</sup> Illicit liquor brewing places are located near adivasi hamlets, which lead to increased consumption, indebtedness and public disorder in the hamlets.

<sup>9</sup> This was introduced after the Muthanga tragedy to appease the adivasis, although regularly available.

<sup>10</sup> While the allotted quantity of rice for each household was 10 kg, only 7- 9 Kgs was provided. Despite being aware of this outright cheating, there is no complaint for fear of not obtaining any food. Others reported that they even could not afford the bus fare to collect the ration.

Protection with measures such as electric fencing and trenches is hampered due to the lack of maintenance.

In Attapady, land ownership among Irula families is common and range from 50 -1.50 cents, cultivating food crops like Ragi, Maize and vegetables. Land ownership is mostly by men (32.7), but few practice cultivation due to poor water resources, attack of wild animals and time spent in paid employment. The lack of apposite support from agriculture office (Krishi Bhavan) is an example of insensitive policies. Despite significant expenditure on grants and subsidies, this has negatively affected irulas (Kalathil 2004). A typical example is the provision of hybrid seedlings of crops such as bananas, which is dependent on chemical fertilisers, pesticides and water. Dry-land organic crops are more important to adivasi livelihoods, in terms of food, nutrients such as iron and eco-friendly practices. Often these schemes are availed by adivasis but are given to other (outsider) groups, showing exploitation of resources. In other cases, arrears in land tax have led to the denial of subsidies from the *Krishibhavan*. Further, women who take up homeland farming also do not approach or not approached by these offices.

**Table II: Household Asset Portfolio, by type of adivasi and gender (%)**

	Natural		Physical		Financial	
	M	F	M	F	M	F
<b>Kattunaikans</b>	23.1	25	0	17.7	21.7	10.2
<b>Irulas</b>	32.7	0	0	10.9	13.1	27.6
<b>Adiyas</b>	9.6	25	0	12.6	26.1	21
<b>Paniyas</b>	34.6	50	0	58.8	39.1	41.2
<b>Total</b>	100	100	0	100	100	

Source: Field Work (2004)

Physical assets are also meagre and unsuitable to diversify livelihoods. Table II shows that males in most households do not own any physical assets, while this is a different picture for women. This is due to the recent operations of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) targeting households through women, who obtain loans to purchase goats and hens and diversifying livelihood strategies. Despite significant programmes for housing and success in meeting their yearly target of Adivasi Programmes, its suitability and quality leaves much to be desired. Most dwellings have leakages, non-functioning solar and electrical systems and lack of adequate toilets. Thus while households do not have adequate sized nor decent quality housing and infrastructure, this further affects their ability to use this as a physical asset to transform their livelihoods, e.g. diversification of income such as extensions, use of space for economic generation activities e.g. tailoring. Some women have learnt tailoring but have not been able to pursue this as a source of income generation.

The financial asset base of adivasi households primarily consists of income from waged work in farm and non-farm sector, or income from own farming, largely dependent on the seasonality of employment. Adiya (21), Irula (27.6) and Paniya (41.2) women earn regular incomes from waged labour and also contribute to financial assets through borrowing from various sources. Borrowing of food materials (groceries) from petty shops is repaid during the working/harvesting season. Most debt accounts are subject to manipulation of money lenders, due to the illiteracy and poor accounting skills of the adivasi women, which drives them to a vicious cycle of debt from various sides. However this temporary debt relief actually perpetuates long term debt as they do not then have any income from their land. In Attapadi, during the off-peak season, it is common for households to obtain loans from informal moneylenders (known as Blade) from the neighbouring state of Tamilnadu. This is seen as a simple procedure compared to loans from formal

institutions<sup>11</sup>. On the whole, that far from owning any financial assets, most households is unable to pursue alternative livelihood strategies and has a strong debt pattern.

#### *Intangible Assets:*

As much as material, social and human capital are important requisites for ensuring the asset base of the adivasis, ensuring sustenance of the livelihoods throughout their life cycle is an important form of capital. This directly impacts on the building of other assets such as human capital, and indirectly influenced by other capital, such as political, social and financial capital. Harrigan (2005) shows how chronic poverty is closely linked with both chronic and transitory food insecurity in Malawi. Being conditioned to economic and food insecurity, deprivation was accepted as a 'norm' and is seen as a form of inter-generational transfer eg Under-weight children and ill-health.

Starvation deaths and diseases caused by mal-nutrition are widely prevalent in the study areas. Illnesses caused by anaemia, poor personal and environmental hygiene were common. In short, the entire life cycle of the adivasis is characterised by ill- health<sup>12</sup> of which scabies, jaundice, cancer, leprosy, tuberculosis, seasonal viral fever, rheumatism, asthma were reported, some being passed on to children. Hamlets located near the townships are reported to have venereal diseases. Increasing cases of physical disability, for mostly males from injuries from accidents at work, and with neglect and lack of treatment have forced women become primary earners and carers, as often girls are withdrawn from school for caring responsibilities. The girls get married at a very early age with little knowledge of pregnancy and childbirth. Traditional adivasi practices are followed; some unsafe, for the termination of pregnancies.

Human capital is not recognised as an important capital or route to build capabilities. Despite a large network of educational institutions from state schools and Multi Grade Learning Centres (MGLC) in the study areas and rigorous efforts of the Tribal Offices, drop-out rates are high due to; puberty age of girls; caring responsibilities; Lack of awareness among parents; expenses towards books and uniforms; distance to school; transfer of school after the age 9-10 with move to secondary school; rearing of goats; and lack of role models to demonstrate benefits of education. To a large extent, education is taken up, but not regularly. While some children do attend the tribal residential schools or nearby schools, this is hampered by high rate of drop-out for economic and social reasons. Young women are sent as domestic maids to cities, for a small amount, and sometimes trapped in prostitution.

Political and social capital defined in terms of the ability to engage in political and social participation, both formal and informal is quite important in livelihood frameworks. However with continuous struggles for an economic livelihood and cases of 'adverse' incorporations in many respects, in general, the adivasi population often refrain from interactions with external communities. Despite robust political activism in campaigning for land rights, there is a lack of awareness on political issues in the selected study areas. Some have been forced to participate in campaigns, organised by the *Adivasi Gotrasabha* in Muthanga and the *Adivasi Kshetra Samithi* but this is not sustained in any way. This may be due to the poor organisation of such activities and the distinct adivasi hierarchy still practised. There is a lack of leadership formation, and in parallel, traditional adivasi leaders have lost their relevance and power in the community. Others are divided into different political parties without real political consciousness, attracted by temporary benefits offered during elections and conventions. Internal conflicts within adivasis, absence of cooperation in grass root efforts is also common. It may be argued that the historical marginalisation of adivasis have resulted in a vulnerable

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<sup>11</sup> Only 2/3<sup>rd</sup> of the total loan is given, the rest is seen as commission, with weekly remittance of Rs100.

<sup>12</sup> Lack of awareness is a major reason for ill-health. Many dislike mainstream health systems due to previous negative experiences.

situation, with lack of capabilities and entitlements, communication skills, meaningful education, community participation and interaction, self-confidence, initiatives, exclusion from the external communities, lack of perceptions and the exercise of freedom. Thus the lack of ability to and absence of, political participation by both men and women at all levels is major reason for the persistence marginalisation.

Social capital as an asset is more crucial for poor than non-poor households, having a positive effect on household welfare (Grootaert and Narayan, 2004). However, not only are adivasi groups exploited and politically unorganised, their limited, interaction with institutions and external communities have cumulated their exploitation and discrimination leading to negative social capital. Adivasi youth are used as carriers in criminal and illegal activities such as illicit liquor sales, cultivation and guarding "Gangs" plantations and plundering forest wealth such as sandalwood, and end up being victims of such crimes, being killed for giving evidence or used as scapegoats. This perpetuates the general stigma that all adivasis are criminals, often treated with suspicion. This attitude excludes adivasis from being entrusted with social responsibilities and leadership, example participation in Self Help Groups or in the Beneficiary committees of Panchayat projects. Of recent, women's Self-Help Groups have been active in mobilising adivasi women which has had a positive effect in terms of community participation and some effort towards household welfare but far off from a sustainable participation that meets both the practical needs and their strategic needs.

#### 4. Conclusion

In the Kerala context, adivasis are adversely incorporated in the mainstream development processes due to the interaction of a number of factors. By and large, most communities are often trapped in both income and human poverty due to a number of reasons, from disadvantage to discrimination based on ethnicity, gender and capabilities. The *Drivers* of such vulnerability and deprivation among adivasis are, primarily, economic and structural in nature, deprived of land as their basic livelihood resource. The limited livelihood options available to adivasi households do not provide a decent quality of life, but exacerbates circumstances that generate different forms of poverty; primarily *intergenerational transfer of economic and human poverty* is common. For most, sustenance capital is more significant than any form of social or economic capital. This is more acute for women, as women need to play a crucial role in the food security of the household. The *maintainers* of chronic poverty relate to indebtedness, discrimination and exploitation which again have a gendered dimension. This is explicit with the aggravating issue of sexual and economic exploitation. Long term ill-health as well as chronic illness is common, where women have to work harder and single handed. In terms of human capital, there is a high drop out from school, for marked for girls. Thus, lack of basic schooling hampers capability building such as stitching, that would allow them economic mobility or diversification. High indebtedness for various reasons to fight economic and social shocks also results in vicious cycles of exploitation and poverty. Lack of support from Farm offices or even recognition for small cultivators is also evident. The major *interrupters* of vulnerability are the increasing presence of SHGs impacting on facilitating community participation and income generation. As critiques have pointed out, such initiatives must not reinforce a new kind of patriarchy, that is 'female driven' (Devika 2005). One of the other significant interrupter of economic vulnerability is migrant work. However this is also riddled with exploitation and needs to be regulated as it could provide a livelihood option for many households.

Most developmental policies aimed for adivasi welfare do not address *their specific needs*, as neither are they consulted at the local level planning exercises. Participation in local level planning and project implementation is still a challenge as they do not know *how* to participate. There is a need for sensitisation of policies and responsive institutions, as interventions are not hamlet specific, and are based on preconceived notions of 'modernisation' and homogeneity of tribes. From the outset it is crucial to note that adivasi groups are not a homogenous group, but

are characterised by a distinctive social hierarchy, which defines social and gender roles, which plays a crucial determinant of economic assets and access to decent livelihoods. The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005<sup>13</sup> is seen as a revolutionary step in the direction of eradicating poverty and unemployment in rural areas by providing at least one hundred days of guaranteed wage employment to every household. One of the key goals of the Millennium Development Goals is to promote gender equality globally as a means to increasing human development. However much studies have commented on the lack of gender sensitised approaches (McGee 2002; Whitehead 2003) and despite recent efforts in gender mainstreaming in development policies, there is a compelling need not only to consider gender issues, but to take into account the multidimensionality of deprivation among *different groups of poor and women* within modernisation and development initiatives. The findings show that women's experiences of poverty should be understood beyond household headship, and deconstructed within the configuration of local, political, social and economic forces. Only then, responsive and specific policies and programmes can be development, and could bring any significant difference and meaning to a historically neglected social group.

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<sup>13</sup> Under the scheme, every registered household would be entitled to at least 100 days guaranteed employment at the wage rate. If work is not provided within 15 days, they will be entitled to a daily unemployment allowance, in cash. The Central Government will provide 90% of funds and State Government will provide for 10% of the total funds.

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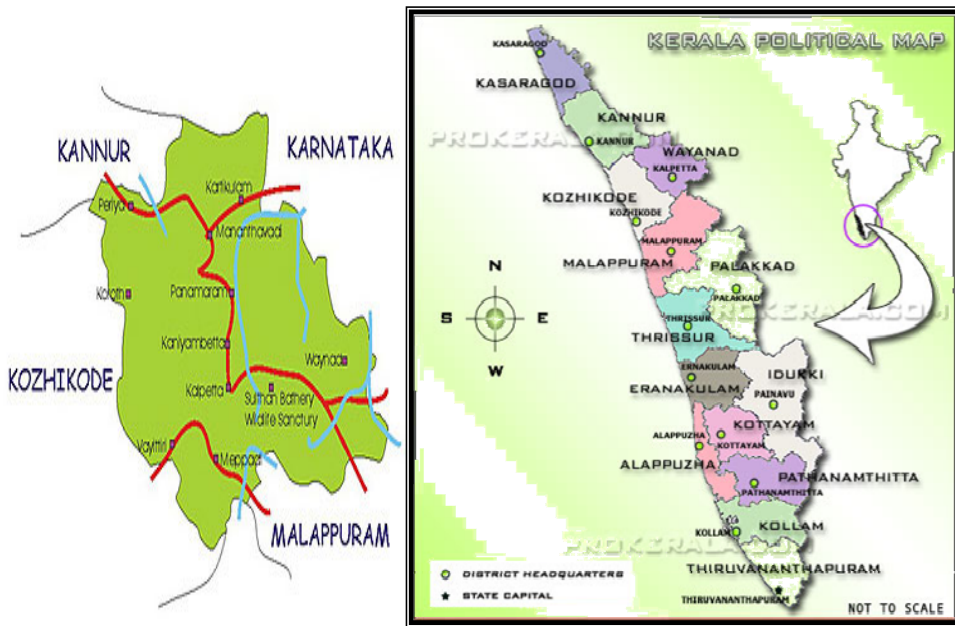
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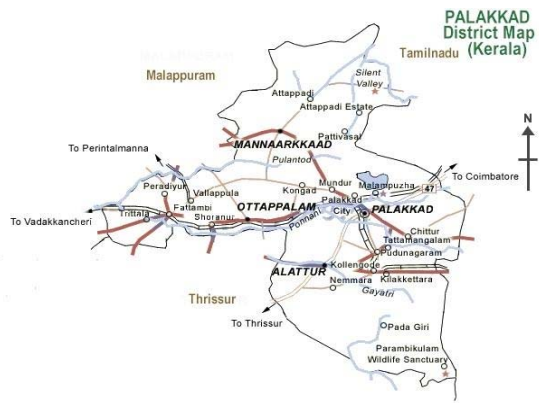
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## Appendix Figure 1: Study Area



Source: [http://www.kairaly.net/kai\\_abtkerala1.htm](http://www.kairaly.net/kai_abtkerala1.htm); <http://www.prokerala.com/kerala/maps/kerala-political-map.htm>



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