CHAPTER VII

Wage Labour and Employment:
Reproduction of Exploitative Relations

This chapter delineates how bondedness and dependency continue in the context of Adivasis in Wayanad and how they alienate, exploit, marginalise and pose a threat to their livelihoods. The first section of the chapter describes the occupational patterns of the Paniyas and Kurichias, their experiences of exploitation in the labour market and the changing nature of labour relations. The second section discusses the role of religion in the reproduction of stigmatised labour relations and how it contributes to the marginalisation of Adivasis. Kodagu labour and the second incarnation of brutal slavery of the Paniyas is discussed. The third section delineates the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) and the experiences of the Paniyas and Kurichias and the extent to which it ameliorates the exploitative labour conditions or reproduces the exploitative relations. The issues discussed in this chapter need to be read in tandem with the exploitative histories of the Adivasi groups discussed in Chapter IV.

According to a study by the Centre of Excellence (2006) seven months in a year form the lean season of employment for the Adivasis taken as a whole in Wayanad, and it is almost nine months for the Paniya community. They report that employment opportunities reduced due to the collapse of prices of agricultural produce after the implementation of economic liberalisation. According to a survey by the Kerala Institute of Local Administration (KILA), 2008 majority of the Adivasi population in Wayanad are employed as agriculture labourers (29668 families - 82.10%). The second main employment is agriculture (1872 families - 5.18%) followed by 3.92 per cent (1418 families) in government and semi government organisations and 2.21 percent (797 families) in NREGS. In non-agricultural wage labour, 2.09 percent (757 families) are involved while the forest sector wage labour accounts for 1.10 per cent (397 families) and forest produce collection accounts for 0.43 per cent (156 families) (KILA Survey 2008). The main factor emerging from the data is that Adivasis in Wayanad are mainly
dependent on agriculture for their livelihood as wage labourers or subsistent agriculturists (around 90%).

According to the KILA survey (2008) out of 32876 children in the age group of 5-15 years, 84 children are labourers and among them 68 are involved in agricultural labour. Those who fall in the age group 15-59 years, form the main productive force which constitutes 97793 (63.84%) of the total Adivasi population in Wayanad. Among them 73503 (75.16%) are employed. In the 15-59 age group, 23.58 per cent are doing supplementary work along with their main work.

Table: 6.

Category wise Employment of Adivasis in Wayanad, 15-59 age group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categorywise employment</th>
<th>Major occupation</th>
<th>Supplementary occupation</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
</tr>
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<td>Agriculture labourers</td>
<td>52227</td>
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<td>Agriculturists</td>
<td>6504</td>
<td>6.65</td>
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<tr>
<td>NREGS</td>
<td>5848</td>
<td>5.98</td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-agriculturists</td>
<td>1966</td>
<td>2.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cattle rearing</td>
<td>1316</td>
<td>1.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wage labour in forest sector</td>
<td>1482</td>
<td>1.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forest produce collection</td>
<td>1089</td>
<td>1.11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: KILA survey (2008)

Among Paniya Adivasis in Wayanad, 14184 families (89.34%) are involved in agriculture labour, 305 families (1.92%) in NREGS and 137 families (0.86%) in the forest sector for their livelihood. Among the Kurichias, 4642 families are involved in agriculture, 369 families in government jobs, 126 families in NREGS and 36 families in the forest sector.
Among Adivasi communities in Wayanad, Paniyas constitute 42197 (43.14%) of the main productive force in the age group 15-59. In this age group, 28912 (68.5%) are agricultural labourers, 369 people (0.87%) are involved in collecting forest produce, 229 (0.54%) people are involved in agriculture and 151 people (0.35%) in cattle rearing. Among the Paniyas who do supplementary work in this age group, 72.27 per cent are involved in NREGS. Some of the Paniyas use agriculture (778), forest produce collection (203), and cattle rearing (150) as a secondary source of livelihood. In the study area it was not possible to include them in a single category of work force.

In the core areas selected for study, the Paniyas are mainly dependent on agriculture wage labour and the Kurichias are involved in subsistence agriculture. The Kurichias and Paniyas participated in NREGS work occasionally. A few Kurichias are employed in the government sector but no Paniyas are to be found even as anganwadi teachers.

According to a study conducted by Aerthayil (2008), Wayanad has the highest rate of unemployment among the Adivasis in Kerala. He points out that Wayanad is the most affected district in terms of loss of working days for Adivasis due to the shift from food crops to commercial crops that has increased during the last ten years. The cash crops require less regular work compared to paddy and other food crops. The Paniyas in the study area reported that till the 1990s, they used to get employment for seven to eight months a year as there was large scale paddy cultivation, coffee and pepper plucking and ginger cultivation. Thus, the conversion of large tracts of paddy cultivation to other crops in the 1990s was a severe blow to the Paniyas who were experts in paddy cultivation (Nair, Paul and Menon 2007). Aerthayil (2008) points out that the crash in the prices of cash crops due to the import of the same product from other countries as part of the neo liberal reforms and new agricultural policies affected the Adivasi wage labourers severely.

**Occupation and Employment Patterns of the Kurichias**

The main source of livelihood of the Kurichias is subsistence agriculture. Most of them used vast areas of land as their customary right during the pre independent period. They were using hill areas and forest areas for shifting cultivation with ragi and settled cultivation with paddy in the low areas. Their shifting cultivation practices and other
opportunities for self-employment using forest resources and hunting are curtailed now with rules and regulations. Presently, they are engaged in settled agriculture - wet land cultivation as well as dry land cultivation like the non-Adivasis.

Agriculture alone cannot provide income for the growing needs of the Kurichias and rare opportunities of government jobs give support to few families among them. In one tharavad, out of 110 adult members, only four members had government employment and three of them were working in the post office and one was working as a clerk in a college. There were no women who were employed. There was one girl studying for B.Ed who may be employed soon. In the other tharavad selected for study, which was a branch of the main tharavad nearby, had 13 families earlier out of whom only two men were government employees. In this tharavad, the previous Karanavan’s marumakan and his children and their families are residing at present and all the others have separated by taking a portion of the property from the common pool. In the three nuclear families selected, two households had government employees - police, conductor and forest guard. Even though it was limited, the employment opportunities in government services became a support in their livelihood as well as in their socialisation process.

However, the pattern of government jobs reveals that they are not appointed to important posts which could have improved their decision making capacity for the evolution of their community. As a teacher from an alternate centre for Adivasi education reported, during the British period, they were at one side or the other of the pistol and now they are appointed in some clerical posts as Indians were permitted in the times of British rule. While visiting one tharavad, I heard one Karanavan announcing to the youth that there were employment opportunities in military services and those interested could join the military services.

For the Kurichias, cultivation was a joint occupation from the beginning and all members of the lineage joined, thus there was not much need of outside wage labour. Even now growing paddy is a joint cultivation practice wherever their tharavad system exists and since it was engraved in their culture, they enjoyed this strenuous work. The Kurichias are known as an agricultural tribe and agriculture is the main source of their livelihood. However, they have not adopted the capitalist mode of agricultural production based on profit.
Further, their tradition of social exclusion from other communities in the past forced them to become self reliant. These skills later helped them to avail themselves of opportunities in the labour market and make a living. There are a few masons and painters among them who have developed these skills while living in joint families. As there were a large number of people staying in one house, big and strong houses were necessary for them unlike the small huts of the Paniyas. A member from the Tulsi tharavad reported that he could work as a contractor and build houses and water tanks in his locality. He also worked as an employee in the Giridhara water project specially meant for Adivasi communities. Manjan from Tulsi tharavad reported,

When the panchayat allotted houses, we could undertake all the construction works in our tharavad by our own people and thus middlemen’s exploitation was less. We are alert in entrusting our own people when such works are available. Still, we need to train some people in driving, tailoring etc. so that we can become self reliant.

The Kurichias had herds of cattle and grazing the cattle in the forest was another occupation which supported their cultivation practices as well as nutritional needs. However, during the enforcement of the law that banned grazing in the forest, step by step they give away their cattle. Since it is their traditional occupation, they are experts in cattle rearing and even today those who have land keep a few cattle for their own use, which becomes a support for meeting their subsistence during difficult times.

Subsistence agriculture reduced the effect of alienation and gave the Kurichias minimum self sufficiency even though modernisation trends in agriculture were alien to their cultivation practices. This aspect will be discussed elaborately in the next chapter. Further, other supplementary work such as NREGS, government employment and cattle rearing contributed to better life conditions among the Kurichias when compared to the Paniyas.

**Paniyas Life Conditions in the Present Labour Market**

Historically, Paniyas caught as slaves were made to take an oath in front of the goddess at the Valliyoor kavu temple to commit that they would work under the jenmi for the entire year. Through strict surveillance, control and punishment, slave labour was enforced. The jenmis needed a work force and they trained the Paniyas who were nomads as bonded labour using a moral framework that described idleness and disobedience as sin. This
moral discourse is still prevalent in Wayanad through the social constructions of non-Adivasis about the Paniyas. Even today, the Paniyas constitute the main wage labour force in Wayanad and their exploitation draws legitimacy from the earlier history of bonded labour in Wayanad as well as the ideological constructions of the past. The bargaining power and resistance of the labourers is minimal since they have to depend on the employer for rare chances of labour in the area due to the agrarian crisis in Wayanad. Adivasi experiences show that the concept of ‘free labour’ is not fully applicable in Wayanad. However, there were occasions of resistance when they were exploited or forced to go for work.

In Edavaka panchayat, two non-Adivasi people went to a Paniya colony and promised double wages for some urgent work in the Catholic Church near their colony. They rejected the offer and when they were compelled, they challenged them saying “If it is so urgent why can’t you go and work?” Non-Adivasi people who are too ingrained in a jenmi culture of seeing the Paniyas as less human beings fail to grasp their refusal to work under enticement or compulsion. And to console themselves, they retired by saying ‘Enthokke Cheythalam Avaru Nannavilla’ (whatever we do for them they will not improve). For the non-Adivasi employer, promising double wages for labour is a great favour. They are not concerned with the limitations and estrangement experienced by the Adivasis. For the Paniyas, double payment promised by the employer would not have much meaning as Marx (1992: 332) points out, ‘better pay for slaves would not mean an increase in human significance or dignity for either the worker or the labour’.

Exploitation of Paniya labour was accompanied by violence or threat of violence at times. In the Edavaka panchayat, two Paniyas were called to work at night and when they asked for their wages, the employer’s helper said that he had no money to pay them. When the Paniyas insisted on getting the money as they needed it urgently, they were beaten up and were told,

You are Paniyas, even if your whole colony comes together, you cannot do anything against us.

The Paniyas beat back the employer’s helper who in turn beat and humiliated them and filed a case against them. The employer admitted his helper in the hospital even though there was no serious injury.
When the Paniyas came to know about this, they also got admitted in hospital and filed a case against their oppressors. The non-Adivasi masters came to know that they were seeking support from the researcher, other NGOs and political parties, they approached the Adivasis for negotiation, and promised them compensation of Rs. 1000/- which was never given on the pretext that they had a loan to repay. The Communist Party [CPI (M)] which supported them also agreed to this stand. However, most of the time, Paniyas did not have the courage to resist violence of these extreme forms.

When I visited the hospital, the Paniya employees, Vasan and Ravan were actually in a panic and they said,

The police come every day to the hospital and ask us to get discharged from the hospital and appear at the police station. The police inactivated my mobile and I was not able to contact anybody.

When the police came to the hospital I asked them about the Adivasis’ complaint and the way non-Adivasis treat the Paniyas. The policeman was silent at first, and revealed that there was political support for the employer. The police even went to their colonies and scolded their women for their spouses not getting discharged and presenting themselves in the police station. But the victims just extended their stay in the hospital by acting that they were sick fearing that without enough support, if they came out, they would have to undergo punishment in the police station. Even their children were fearful to go to school for a few days as the school was near the place where the incident happened. The children too stayed with them in the hospital till they were discharged. The political non-Adivasi nexus is very evident here and even the communist party who acted as supporters of the victim at their request showed minimum interest in deal their problem.

During the days of slavery, fleeing was the only way to escape from work and the brutal punishments meted out by the masters. Today, also if they are not willing to work, they just hide from the employer’s sight after promising to do the work. The general comment from non-Adivasi people is that they do not keep their word to report to work and that they are liars. The Paniya community comes out with its own way of resistance when they are in a group and where they have control over the situation. For instance, another landowner was furious while stating that Paniya youth insisted on Rs.500 for three hours of wage labour late in the evening. However, since Paniyas are the main work
force in that area, non-Adivasis had to depend on them and thus had to comply to their demands at least occasionally. Both parties vent their feelings not always through confrontation but through indirect comments. The Paniyas, especially the Paniya youth are becoming resistant to the demeaning constructions and they resist whenever a chance appears for example by abusing the non-Adivasi employer after drinking alcohol. When the circumstances are perceived as threatening, they run away or hide from the employer. As Scott (1985) points out the covert and overt forms of resistance can affect changes in the behavior of the landowners as well as in government policies in the long run. Constant struggle against the jenmis by the labourers in the 1960s compelled the government to introduce land reforms and abandon slavery. Anyway providing 10 cents of land is not meant for building their subsistence capacity but can only suffice for a homestead and they have to depend on rich landowners for labour to survive. Yet, ownership of 10 cents can increase the freedom to choose different employers without fear of eviction from the house one built in the jenmi’s land. But majority of the Paniyas in Wayanad could not avail of this benefit due to their lack of awareness about the concept of private property and practical procedures to acquire the necessary documents for land. However, in the case of Paniyas poverty, debt and lack of resources for survival maintains a dependent relationship to the employer and this situation is exploited by the employer to control and treat them in inhuman ways. When lack of wage labour affects the Paniyas materially, the historical stigma of being slaves and a labour force for the ‘high caste’ and ‘high class’ in Wayanad is used to dehumanise and marginalise them.

Ideological Construction of the Paniya ‘Idle Worker’

In the early and mid nineteenth century, discourses on labour were very much part of a moral and racialised discourse, and hence used direct surveillance and moral instruction in order to make the workers more civilised. By the end of the 19th century, the morally inflicted discourse of idleness gave way to a scientific discourse of energy according to the European liberal doctrines (Philip 2003). Philip points out that in the colonies, the moralising discourse on labour persisted even in the twentieth century. Thus, the European liberal doctrines cannot be applied in the colonial context, where racial differences naturalise class difference and thus legitimise the strict surveillance and moral supervision of the working population (ibid). In Wayanad, the ‘Paniya colonies’ are still
affected by this moral discourse and face the stigma of condemning them as idle and lazy by the non Adivasi community even today, but in a lesser degree compared to the period of slavery and bonded labour. One landowner in the study area was disgusted while talking about the Paniyas’ lack of response after promising to work for him. He said,

Earlier, we could have give them a nice beating to make them obey our commands. Today if we touch them or scold them, they can complain against us.

It emerges that the mentality of the employer has not changed even though the protective laws for Adivasis prevent them from physical harassment. The stigma about forcing Paniyas for wage labour and the stigma around their identity as labour class is not confined to Wayanad but is widespread. During a discussion about the Paniya community, a rich landowner in the neighbouring district reflected on his experience,

Oh! the Paniyas – Nayinte Makkal (an abuse literally meaning children of dog). One day I went with my car to fetch them for work. They resisted coming with me. See their pride! They deserve iruttady (severe beating). No other way to tame them. When electricity goes in the town we ask the shop keepers to blow off their petromaxes (lanterns) and we beat them. We tie stones in bath towels and give them a nice beating.

Thus, the Paniyas continue to be treated as slaves and their resistance is seen as ‘pride’ that needs to be tamed with more violence. When the Paniyas have enough work, they may go for three days of work and then relax ignoring the demand from the employer. When the money is exhausted they start working again. The ‘mainstream’ capitalist society may describe this as pride, laziness and idleness, but for the Paniyas relaxing after a few days work is like their second nature. Unless there is compulsion to meet their material needs they keep away from wage labour. As Marx (1992: 326) points out ‘he is at home when he is not working and not at home when he is working’ is still relevant in the case of the Paniya community and the work becomes more forced than voluntary. Some of the Paniya people reported that they are not able to work continuously due to health reasons. However, the morality discourse continues to be deployed to make the Paniyas a work force, whose natural tendency was nomadic life and food gathering in the past.
During the festival season in the Valliyoor kavu temple, one Nair landowner was trying to reconstruct the past slavery of the Adivasis, especially the Paniyas and the Adiyas by trivializing and justifying it. He said,

What existed in the past was not slavery but just a small trick to create fear of god and to make Paniyas consistent in their work. They are idle and not trustworthy and without adopting the method of creating fear of Valliyooramma they used to disappear without replanting the plucked paddy in our fields.

He quoted from history books to prove that the Paniyas are thieves, but when asked about any incident about their stealing in the locality, he became silent. Through the continuous use of ideological constructions like ‘not trustworthy’, ‘idle’, and ‘thieves’, the act of exploitation is deflected. The Paniyas are the people who worked hard in the fields of the Nairs and the Brahmins as the latter stayed away from manual labour in their own agricultural field. Neither the contribution of the Paniyas nor the violence meted out to them in the past are highlighted in history, instead they are portrayed as idle, thieves and betrayers.

**Changing Nature of Labour Relations**

The feudal forms of production gradually gave way to production for profit, which is the essential characteristic of the capitalist system of production. And this production for profit totally depends on the means of production and the relations of production and those who do not have the means or the subordinate class still get exploited and marginalised in society. This explains why the marginalisation of the Paniyas in Wayanad has a strong material base - because they do not own any means of production, their labour is exploited to the maximum by the landowners. The Paniyas said that the minimum reciprocity which existed between the landowners and their wage labourers has disappeared during recent times.

Nellan from Paniyan community said,

When there was paddy cultivation in Wayanad, if the landowners got a good harvest, they used to share the benefit with their labourers. The Muslim merchant ’s father used to give plenty of paddy grains as ‘sakkath’ during their festival season and in the fasting month as we used to work in his paddy fields. Now paddy cultivation has become very rare and if they cultivate it is only for their use.
While, paddy cultivation is seen as cooperative affair with mutual dependence on the landowner and the labourers, cash crop cultivation is seen as totally profit oriented, where the support, mutual sharing and social relations have ended in pure market relations. A media person, in Wayanad said that the employers who take Adivasi people to Kodagu for ginger cultivation earn 15 to 16 lakhs as profit, if the yield is good. But they do not share the profit with the Adivasi labourers who work hard for them. This is also the case with coffee, pepper and other cash crops. The employers become very rich but no Adivasi labourer benefits.

Raven from Kunnil Paniyan colony reported that when the migrants from Thiruvithamkur and Cochin came, they started paying for wage labour in cash. The rapid growth of non-Adivasi people in the area resulted in the monetisation of the economy and also the loss of common lands led to the erosion of the Adivasi economy based on collection of food materials, mutual exchange and sharing of natural resources. Thus, the gradual conversion from pre-capitalist society to the capitalist market oriented society lead to commodification of labour and the workers lost even the minimum social benefits they accrued from their masters, which further challenged the minimum livelihood security they had in the past.

The Paniyas and Kurichias treated natural resources of the hills and nearby forests as common property resources and no household were excluded from accessing the resources for their survival. Kurichia elders also reported that in feudal and colonial times their livelihood security was mostly based on resource availability and shifting cultivation in the surrounding areas and with its loss it changed solely to settled agriculture and availability of money. However, loss of these natural resources pushed the Paniya and Kurichia communities to have monetary concerns to meet their day to day life. The money economy was alien to the Adivasis and they reported rampant exploitation of money lenders and petty shop owners, which led them to debt traps, further dependence and bondedness.

Being landless and dependent on others even for fuel wood and leafy vegetables, the Paniyas are experiencing another kind of slavery. The barbed wires around almost all private lands symbolically represent exclusive ownership and the Paniyas are ousted from the places where they used to collect firewood and food items. Non-Adivasis constantly
create fear amongst the Paniyas regarding the boundary and if they cross the boundaries, they become encroachers and thieves and a very clear demarcation as “we” and “they” automatically appears in their descriptions when they discuss their livelihood issues.

On the contrary, the Kurichias who owned land continued their cultivation practices and try to achieve self-sufficiency. One Kurichia Karanavan said that if they have half an acre of cash crop, they cannot survive today but if they have half an acre of paddy field, they are self sufficient at least for their food. In the non-Adivasi’s mind, this is foolishness and for the Adivasis it is their wisdom which survived amidst all calamities of life. Many non-Adivasi farmers committed suicide when the market value of the cash crop went down. The subsistence economy of the Kurichia people helped them to meet the crisis without frustration and their subsistence cultivation practices present an alternative in the midst of agricultural crisis. They planted mixed crops in their gardens and even though it did not promise huge profit, it was enough to meet their livelihood needs. However, monetised economy and the resultant debt traps affected Kurichia livelihood options and led them also to dependency. For instance, the Kurichia elders reported that there were cases of land alienation in their community to money lenders and business people even though they could save their land from them in the core areas selected for study.

Another landowner’s complaint about Paniya men was that they go to employers who distribute liquor before work and after borrowing money, at times they escape. Since there is legal sanction against physical violence and when moral surveillance fails, non Adivasi people resort to distribution of alcohol to attract Paniyas for work and then extract maximum work from them. Giving advance money during lean seasons is another way adopted to entice Paniyas to work. The middle man, job brokers and those who do petty business with them becomes channels of dependency and bondage for the Paniyas. Similarly, debt in the grocery shops also compels them to work for the shop owners leading to a vicious cycle of indebtedness.

Karl Marx’s analysis of society with its focus on the working class helps to understand the exploitation in wage labour and estrangement of the Paniya community only partially. However, Marx did not include an indepth analysis of the significance of religion, nature and culture in the understanding of society and their oppressive
mechanisms. Gurukkal (1992:32) points out “The temple was the hinterland headquarters of agrarian control and the economic life of early medieval South India was organised around it”. It is therefore not surprising that the Valliyoorkavu temple, earlier famous for buying and selling Adivasi bonded labourers, continues to have a hold over their lives.

**Valliyoorkavu Temple: Religion in the Reproduction of Stigmatised Labour Relations**

The Valliyoorkavu temple despite its history of being the centre of ‘Adivasi’ enslavement, remains an important place of worship for the Adivasis. In 1951, the control of the temple was taken over by the Department of Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowment (H.R and C.E). The day to day administration of the temple is vested with the manager, who is nominated by *Ooralars* (hereditary owners) and approved by the Assistant Commissioner of the department.43

According to the Executive Manager of the temple, Valliyoorkavu temple came under the category of Grade A44 from August 6, 1996. In 2008, it came under the authority of the Malabar Devaswam Board. However, the Kurichia elders said that the Paniyas and Kurichias also could have been given the position as *Ooralars* of the temple as it was their place of worship. Today, the Paniyas as well as Kurichias claim that Valliyoorkavu was their temple before caste Hindus came to occupy it and they had a great role in recognising the presence of Valliyooramma in the *kavu* (Refer to the chapter on History). A Kurichia panchayat member Chandan reported,

> We Adivasis experienced the divinity in Valliyoorkavu and started worshiping Valliyooramma and slowly the Bhrahmins and Nairs became the superiors and they decided that they only can do *pooja* there. When I was small, we were not allowed to enter inside the main premise of the temple but from outside we bow and the *prasadam* also is kept down on the floor. But now we can go and bow in front of the statue.

The recent inhabitants of Valli Paniya colony, situated in the premises of Valliyoorkavu temple claim that they came to the temple premises 75 years back and before that they

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43 Ooralar - Hereditary owners of the temple. The temple was owned by three hereditary *ooralars*.

44 The temple under HR and CE Department are classified into four grades based on annual income with effect from August 6, 1996. Grade A: Rs. 10 lakhs and above; Grade B: Above Rs. 1 lakh and below Rs.10 lakhs. Grade C: Rs. 50, 000 and below Rs. 1 lakh. Grade D: Below Rs. 50,000. The classification adopted prior to August 6, 1996 was different. Grade I: Rs. 1 lakh and above; Grade II: Rs. 60,000 –Rs. 99,999, etc.
were living in Vemom (5 kilometres away from Mananthavady town) and were working for the *jenmis* as slave labourers. Paniyas were living in the periphery of the *jenmis* land but when *jenmis* sold the land to the migrants, they lost their land and they left that place and came to the forest area near to the temple.

The Paniyas and Kurichias narrated myths to affirm that in Valliyooravu temple, they have an important place. Even these myths are not making them actual owners or shareholders but only as mediators to the actual revelation of the Devi to the Namboorthiri Brahmins. The executive manager of Valliyooravu temple and a Paniya Mooppan, who worked earlier as *Adichuthali* (washerman) in the temple said the same story about Paniya community’s change of location from the roadside to the recent spot where Paniya houses are situated. Karuppan Mooppan recounted,

First we were staying on the road side near the temple. Paniyas showed laziness and became late to wash the utensils used in Valliyooravu temple. Only the Mooppan turned up for the work. One day all our huts caught fire. But Mooppan’s house did not catch fire. All other houses got burned to ashes and we are given land here (in between the *Thazhathambalam* and *Mele ambalam*) by the temple authorities.

The Paniya community does the main manual work for all the activities in the temple and for the festival season, such as cleaning the area, washing utensils and bringing firewood for cooking. The myth narrated above communicates a message that if they do not cooperate for temple work Valliyooramma would punish them. It is observed that they are very faithful to the work in the temple. During festival times they work day and night in the temple.

**Division of Labour and New Definitions of “Rights”**

The usage of the word ‘right’ actually gives an impression of one’s particular freedom and authority over an entity. Today there is a common saying by the Nair and the Namboothiri communities that the Adivasis have certain ‘rights’ in Valliyooravu temple. Enquiring about the above mentioned rights of the Paniya community, it is revealed that the local Paniyas are asked to bring a very long bamboo flag pole - the *Kodimaram* from the forest for the purpose of hoisting the temple festival flag. In addition, their ‘rights’ include cleaning the compound during festival season, bringing firewood and other materials for preparing food for the large number of devotees, providing plantain leaves
for the ‘nercha bhakshanam’ (food offered to the devotees), removing the leaves after the devotees have eaten food, cleaning the large cooking vessels and to provide other necessary manual labour. They do all these tasks on a daily wage basis. A Kurichia panchayat member Chandan reported,

By assigning the Paniyas tasks like washing vessels, bringing firewood, bringing plantain leaves etc. and by keeping them as Adichuthali (washerman) in the temples, the slavery is continuing in another form. This is continued not only in Valliyoor Kavu but also in other temples too. And they establish and continue this tradition by saying that it is the Thampuran’s (diety’s) commandment. Even in the committees they are not given representation and thus are not included in the decision making. Even clerical posts are not given to us even though there are educated members among both Paniyas and Kurichias.

It emerges that religion is still used for continuing the old hierarchical order and traditions. By invoking the modern discourse of ‘rights’ in the context of temple, Paniya subordination and its exploitative condition are reproduced. Even today the stigma attached to Adivasi identity is very well utilised for the maintenance of the prevailing modes of power structure in the temple.

The asymmetric relationship is not only established among the Non-Adivasis and Adivasis but also among Adivasi groups. The Kurichias landedness and their history of being a warrior group give them a comparatively better status. For instance, the temple authorities still assign different duties to Paniyas and Kurichias. A Kurichian from Karpooram tharavadu said,

For celebrating Valliyoor Kavu festival the one-month long manual labour is mostly done by the Paniyas and Kurichias. Kurichia people also have certain ‘rights’ like preparing kōdiramaram, pantham (a torch made out of cloth tied to a stick dipped in Kerosin to burn), conducting Kathinavedi (a kind of firework), and to erect a pandal (temporary shed) for Kurichiya Muni (Kurichiya Ancestor god) and keep burning Nilavilakku (lamp with many layers) for fourteen days in their pandal. In the festival committee Kurichias and Paniyas do not have enough representation and so the voice is missing in the planning and decision making processes. We do not have representation in the temple administrative staff. Even being famous warriors, the security post is not given to our community but a Gurkha from Orissa is appointed for that post. We had withdrawn ourselves from the annual festival responsibilities for 12 years as we are paid very little for our services (Rupees four and food during the festival days). Now they have increased the remuneration to Rs. 4000/- and we are cooperating for the festival. But the actual amount of our work contributes Rs. 40,000/- as minimum 30 men are involved in the work. We need more people in the festival committee to demand our rights.

Meenam 1st to 10th, two men are needed during day and night. From Meenam 10th to 15th, 35 people are needed for holding flags, pandals, and for fire work (Kathina).
There were also attempts to project a Hindu identity for Kurichias and Adivasi identity for Paniyas through the narrations and different constructions about the two groups by the festival committee. For instance, while installing the kodimaram, the festival committee announced that Edachana tharavadu (Nairs), Karpooram tharavadu (Kurichias) and the Adivasis of Valli colony are responsible for Kodiyettam. This clearly indicates that the temple authorities and festival committee have not counted Kurichias as Adivasis and tried to include them in the Hindu fold even though they were not given the same status and representation in all the temple activities. People from the surrounding area reported that the RSS had conducted a mass drill in the temple premises and that there was a clash between the Communist party and RSS groups and that they were forced to discontinue it.

By introducing the term, ‘right’ the high caste Hindus who organise the temple activities, reconstructed the Adivasis experience of exploitation as a favour to them by the Valliyooramma. They established the concept of right in such a way that if they did not perform their rights in the temple, they would be punished and not get the blessing from their god. Paniyas also interiorise and perpetuate this and say that we have certain rights in the temple. However, the temple authorities and caste Hindus use their fear of god even today. The double sense of invoking fear through the modern discourse such as ‘right’ and the traditional moral discourses of ‘debt’, religion works as an ideological tool to legitimise the subjugation and prevent the oppressed from agitation. Heuze (2009) points out that in Hindu culture, life is often interpreted as a process of debt to the gods, to the ancestors, to the rishis and life is for paying debts. As Heuze points out, the Adivasis do not know the Hindu scriptures but the ideology of debt reaches them and is conveyed through the relationship they have with the higher castes. Through certain personal bonds with an obedient Mooppan or an obedient servant, they perpetuate Hindu ideology and possibilities to challenge these myths are constrained.

On the contrary, the Kurichias were less dependent on the temple and have also undergone less violence during slavery and there were voices of resistance in the festival ground itself about the corruption in the usage of funds and about the lack of sharing of power. The Kurichias preserve their right to create a separate temporary shed for their gods and collect offerings from their devotees. While talking with them in the festival
ground they raised objection to not keeping *bhandarappetty* (box to collect offering in cash) in their name, the way the Edachana Nair castes keep theirs. Thus, Valliyoor kavu temple which was once famous for buying and selling bonded labourers still plays a major role in legitimising the power structure and the division of labour existing in the society and thus in maintaining the prevailing order of production and reproduction of bondedness. They are not excluded with a strong untouchability discourse but what is present today is an ‘adverse inclusion’ as in Nathan and Xaxa’s (2012: 3) description about the Adivasis.

Even though some of the Paniyas mentioned how they were exploited, they are still faithful to the temple activities. For instance, they offer their wage during the festival season and take responsibility for distributing *nercha bhakshanam* for one day. During the festival, it was observed that a Paniya *Mooppan* was struggling to collect money from the community in the temple yard to give *nercha bhakshanam* for one day. He said that he had to collect a minimum amount of Rs. 1500 for it. Paniya youths from his colony who work the whole day, came in the evening and gave the money to the *Mooppan*. They informed that if they did not get enough money, they would take it from the festival committee, but it would be deducted from their wages. Thus, even their meager earnings went into the temple fund to pay back the ‘debts’.

A Kurichia *Karanavan*, Kannan, reported that there was huge wastage and misutilisation and destruction of temple properties by the authorities and that they could not intervene as they had no representation in the Board Committee. Kannan said that the temple had a lot of cattle which were sold by the authorities without any account. A Paniya youth from Valli colony was of the opinion that if they had begun a dairy farm with those cattle, or a handicraft project using the resources from the forest around the temple, many of their youth could have got employment. Some of the Paniya youth were disappointed as they were not even given a clerk’s post even though they were the main workforce for the temple. The Paniyas and Kurichias are devoid of employment other than a Paniya *Mooppan* holding a permanent job as *adichuthali* (washer man) in Valliyoor kavu temple. They also said that the paddy fields which were given to them for cultivation until a few years ago are now kept barren by the temple authorities for holding an exhibition during the festival season. Another Paniya youth mentioned that it could be
easily cultivated once a year before the exhibition. The temple earns around Rs.16 lakh as rent from the exhibition alone and they had the right to use it for the development programmes. She expressed that if temple authorities wished, they could plan many development programmes for the Paniyas in the temple premises. Lack of permanent labour, lack of self employment and casualisation of hard manual labour by depicting it as the rights and duties of Adivasis are the tools that the upper caste have used to manage a work force around the hinterland of Valliyorkavu. However, the temple authorities are not providing the Adivasis alternate employment opportunities, thinking that such opportunities may reduce the Adivasi dependence on the temple and their obligation to do the duties and to remain obedient and faithful labourers forever.

Today, the agriculture economy in Wayanad is facing a threat and the landowners want cheap labour due to the decrease and fluctuation in prices of agricultural products. The Paniya community is the most vulnerable among the Adivasis who depend on wage labour as the only means for their survival. The Marxian theories and the concept of free labour are not fully applicable in the Wayanad situation because of the feudal remnants, the crisis in agriculture and the scarcity of wage labourers. Even the trade unions could not progress much in the fight against the capitalist mindset except in getting some improvement in the wages they were earning. Lampan from Kunnil colony said that they joined for some protests but during the emergency period everything came to an end. However, the asymmetric relations are not challenged and the human rights and human dignity aspects are ignored by the left wing and right wing parties. The protest from the Adivasi communities for land did not succeed due to the inaction of successive governments as Adivasis are numerically, politically and economically weak and thus marginalised as we have seen in Chapter IV.

The climatic change due to environmental destruction, the price fluctuations in agricultural products and modernisation of agriculture further challenge the labour opportunities of Adivasis. According to Paniya leaders, decrease in productivity due to environmental factors and pest attacks in the case of pepper and coffee in the late 1990s and 2000s was another blow to them as farmers stopped employing them for these jobs due to loss and debt. Their flight to Kodagu in the neighbouring state of Karnataka for
labour due to lack of wage labour in Wayanad unravels stories of a different kind of slavery, more violent and brutal.

**Kodagu Labour**

During the last two decades the migration to Kodagu for employment has increased as farmers in Wayanad started leasing land in Karnataka state and started ginger cultivation on a large scale to recover from the agricultural crisis and loss they experienced in Wayanad and also after recognising the possibility of making huge profits. However, the seasonal migration in the agriculture sector and the bondage of Adivasis recruited by giving an advance amount through job brokers as well as by the farmers in Wayanad is not addressed adequately by the government, non government organisations or by tribal development departments. Exploitation of Adivasi labourers in Kodagu was reported by Adivasi people even three decades ago. But till now there has been no effective action plan to resolve the issue.

Lampan from Kunnil Paniyan colony said,

*Kodagu* labour is not a recent development. Thirty years ago people from Kodagu came to our colonies to hire labourers. One night they came and promised to give money for their work and took people in one lorry. When my grandfather and father’s two brothers died, my father and I went there and brought back our other relatives. Father’s two brothers, Maru and Kappan were seriously ill when we reached there. Their bodies were swollen and Maran said that others had died from the same symptoms. So we brought them back and one died after reaching here.

Even after having this experience, the younger generation from Kunnil went again and they narrated stories of running away twice due to brutal treatment and unbearable living conditions on the work site. Ruha, from the same colony said that her husband Kappan lost his eye sight after coming back from Kodagu. He remembered that while plucking pepper, some white powder had fallen into his eyes and it pained for a long time and after a few days, he lost his eye sight partially.

A Kurichia employed in the TB centre, Mananthavady, Wayanad reported that TB patients who were undergoing medication were taken to Kodagu for work and he was furious about the inhumaness and greed of the non Adivasi people in Wayanad. As he could not get the patients to have DOT treatment, he sends the medicine through the
employer. In Arayal colony, they reported that even children are hired for wage labour in Kodagu.

The Paniyas take the risk of going for wage labour to Kodagu even when their health condition is crucial. Even after knowing about the brutal treatment and pathetic living conditions they go to Kodagu for work. This indicates nothing else but the hardship they undergo in their colonies to meet their daily survival. In lean seasons of employment they need some money to manage their household and the advance amount given to them is an actual relief and they become ready to suffer any hardship to earn a livelihood for the family. One Paniyan said that the job brokers give them tempting promises about the facilities and good working conditions and they are also attracted to travelling to distant places and working as a group. All these become an impetus to go to Kodagu for an experience as these habits are inherent in their nomadic and traditional culture. Even though they set out with enthusiasm, some of them run away when confronted with brutal treatment and exploitation. However, the system of advance payment to the Paniyas for migrant labour at Kodagu is another form of neo-bondage. There are instances of resistance when they come in contact with the oppressive situation there.

Naman the Paniya Oorumooppan recounted the resistance story of his people running away from Kodagu and filing a case against the employer who took them for work,

Seven Adivasis were taken to Kodagu for climbing on Eucalyptus trees and cutting leaves. They had no experience of climbing big trees and they informed the employer. But the employer lied and when they reached the work site, they realised those were big trees but decided to stay as they had taken advance money from the employer, Mr. Regi. After one week’s work they were extremely tired and informed Regi that they wanted to leave. As he did not agree, they decided to come by themselves and Regi knowing their plan arranged gundas from Karnataka to block them. They were beaten up on their way and while two of them ran and escaped and the other five were taken back and shut in a room and the following day they were taken back to the work site and forced to work. The two escaped, reached Ambalavayal, approached me and gave details of the cheating. Immediately we filed a case in the police station and I admitted them to a hospital as they had been beaten by the gundas. Regi was called to the station, but he did not come. The police maintained that as the incident had taken place in Karnataka state, they could not conduct an enquiry. He asked me to give another petition if there are minors among them. There were two boys who were under 18. Then he advised that I write a petition that they were missing... the police, me and Madhavan from Uraly Kuruman community reached there by evening and we kept the two minors in the jeep first and asked the others to come if they were interested in coming back. They also got into the jeep. Next day, we went to the station and Regi had to pay Rs. 9000 as the hospital expense and wage. Then he was asked to withdraw the fake case that he had filed in Karnataka against the Adivasis saying that they had beaten him. He was warned by the police not to repeat such crimes.
Even though they got some compensation in this case the culprit escaped without any punishment. This again affirms the general perception that for Adivasis justice means compensation and the harassment they have undergone remains unaddressed. However, Chinnappan being a landholder and an educated man and having had experience in organising people for the Adivasi cause, he could get some support from the police and the CPI (M) party. But he also could not challenge the exploitation which compromises human dignity with money power.

‘Neethivedhi’, a Human Rights NGO in Kalpetta, Wayanad, reported that their attempt to take some of these cases to the court failed due to Kodagu being in a different jurisdiction. But with the efforts of Neethivedhi and Adivasi leaders in Wayanad, the District Superintendent of police issued an executive order in 2007, making it mandatory to register the names of Adivasi labourers taken to other districts or states, but this also was not fully implemented. Neethivedhi conducted a study among 122 affected Adivasi families who suffered severe exploitation and torture or death in Karnataka. A people’s tribunal was organised on November 22, 2008 to hear their grievances and take further action. Their report shows that from 1991 to 2005, among the 122 cases they could enquire, 99 Adivasis had died, 7 persons were missing, 16 returned home after being tortured. Among them 81 were Paniya workers, 25 were Kattunayakas, 9 were Adiyas, and 6 were Kurumas and 1 was from the Scheduled Caste (SC) category. Among these 99 deaths, suspicious murder was reported as 34, natural death 15, occupational disease 36, death unknown as 14. This data indicates the inhuman conditions under which Adivasis are working in Karnataka. This is the list of the people who came in contact with Neethivedhi and approached the tribunal and the actual cases who suffered in Kodagu will exceed this.

The study report and the discussions in the Paniyasadas (the conference organised by the Centre for Development Studies and University of Montreal in Wayanad) prompted the SC/ST commission to appoint a study group including an SC/ST commission member, representatives from panchayat leadership and Adivasi NGO’s. Both study findings reveals the brutality and violence meted out to the Adivasis in Karnataka ginger fields. Suspicious deaths, severe torture, over time work, law wages, child labour, sexual exploitation, inadequate shelter, lack of nutritious food, lack of medical facility, alcohol
distribution as part of wage to extract maximum work etc. are reported in the study group report. Further, it reported that for women labourers there was no separate shed or toilets. No protective measures are adopted in the usage of pesticides and chemical fertilisers. The middleman takes them for work giving an advance to the family without reporting to the Adivasi development office or police station and exploitation is rampant. The employers are not keeping a register or they do not know how many went for work and how much wage each of them earn (study group report).

Even though the SC/ST commission promised some quick action regarding the Kodagu issue the only thing that happened was filing the cases in bulk in the court and the promise to have some negotiation with the Karnataka government. Thus Kodagu labour reincarnate as a grave form of bonded labour to the Paniyas. First of all it is bonded as they are promising their labour for an advance amount and till they finish the work they have been assigned, they do not have the chance to escape from there. As we have seen the attempts of escape was punished with brutal physical violence just like what they experienced during slavery. The severe torture, alcohol distribution, sexual harassment etc. increases the gravity of the slavery they experience. For instance, one job broker said that Paniyas understand only the language of beating and when they quarrel after drinking alcohol he gives them ‘nice’ beatings. Alcohol is provided in the morning to extract maximum work and when they enter into conflict after drinking they are severely punished. Making them work without paying minimum wage, inadequate shelter, lack of nutritious food and medical facility all add to the slave existence of a Paniya labourer in Kodagu. However, Paniyas are forced to sell their labour power in the midst of these unfavourable circumstances in Kodagu due to scarcity of wage labour in lean seasons in Wayanad. The next section will analyze the state intervention to ameliorate the labour scarcity of Adivasis in Wayanad through the national employment guarantee scheme and Adivasis experiences of them.

**National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) and Adivasis in Wayanad**

For ameliorating the various issues faced by the Adivasis, a number of programmes and schemes have been introduced at the state and national levels. There were various employment generation programmes earlier and the recent programme is NREGS. The
Government of India passed the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, in September 2005. NREGS implemented in the year 2006, gave the supreme priority to employment generation. The Act gives legal guarantee for a minimum of one hundred days of wage employment in a financial year to a rural household, whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled and manual work. If an applicant is not provided employment within 15 days of receipt of the application seeking work or from the date on which the employment has been sought she/he can apply to the panchayat secretary for unemployment allowance. The Act is applicable in the districts notified by the Government of India. Wayanad and Palakkad districts in Kerala were included in the first list of selected 200 districts to implement NREGS programmes and the scheme came into force from February 2, 2006 in the rural areas of these two districts.

According to the Kerala Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (KREGS) instructions, the Grama Panchayat shall be the principal authority for planning and implementation of the Scheme. At the intermediate level, the Block Panchayat and at the district level, the District Panchayat shall be the principal authority for planning and implementing the scheme. The District Collector shall be appointed as the District Programme Coordinator (DPC) for the implementation of the scheme in the District. The DPC was assisted by a Deputy Development Commissioner called the joint programme coordinator. The DPC constitute a committee at the District level for smooth implementation. At the state level, the Commissioner for Rural Development (CRD) shall be the State Programme Coordinator (SPC). An Additional Development Commissioner assists the CRD for implementing the scheme and there shall be a cell at the state level with the Additional Development Commissioner to look after all implementation aspects. The Grama Panchayat is responsible for identification of the works in the Grama Panchayat area and for executing and supervising the work as per the recommendations of the Gram Sabha and the Kudumbasree units in the panchayat. In Kerala, the entire programme was implemented through the Grama Panchayat, scrutinised by the Block and District Panchayats. The work is executed through the Area Development Society (ADS)/Community Development Society (CDS) of Kudumbasree units and its selected ‘Kudumbasree mates’ (supervisor and helper) supervise the work.
**Kudumbasree and NREGS**

In Kerala, Kudumbasree is characterised as a ‘women oriented’ poverty eradication mission to empower women (Devika and Thampi 2007). It was started in 1998 by the Government of Kerala with the aim of eradicating poverty within a decade. Kudumbasree leadership was organised into a state wide self help group network aimed at improving the economic well being of families through women directing them into micro-enterprises and thrift and credit activities. Devika and Thampi point out that Kudumbasree places women from Below the Poverty Line (BPL) households at the centre of the poverty eradication efforts of the state. They highlight that the present structure of Kudumbasree is composed of Neighbourhood Groups (NHG’s) which were joined together into Area Development Societies (ADS) of the ward level, which were in turn united into a Community Development Society (CDS) at the Municipal level. Kudumbasree neighbourhood groups and its leaders have a role in the planning and implementation of NREGS. The Kudumbasree mates who supervise the NREGS work are elected from the Area Development Society (ADS) of Kudumbasree mission. It is helpful to understand very briefly the participation of Adivasi groups in the Kudumbasree programmes. In Wayanad district though 35882 families have been brought under the scheme and formed 2236 NHGs (Neighbourhood Groups), the most vulnerable and poverty stricken Adivasi groups like the Paniyas are still out of coverage.  

46 It is observed that out of four Paniya colonies in the study area, they have formed neighbourhood groups in three colonies but they discontinued after the initial enthusiasm. According to Kudumbasree mission’s evaluation, the lack of thrift and credit habit among the Adivasis was the reason for their lack of interest in joining Kudumbasree. At this juncture, Kudumbasree introduced a special project for sustainable development of Adivasi families. In their sustainable development project, Kudumbasree introduced the credit first policy for the Adivasis as a trial to achieve their participation. The organisation will deposit 2500 rupees for each Adivasi group in the beginning and take measures not to withdraw the full amount and wind up the group.  

47 To facilitate the thrift habit among the Adivasis, Kudumbasree

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46 Data collected from District Kudumbasree Mission, Kalpetta in 2009.

47 From the Project plan for sustainable development for Adivasis collected from District Kudumbasree Mission, Kalpetta.
planned to use Adivasi promoters after giving them special training. However, the field reality was different even after this modification; panchayats in the study area could not point out even one Paniya Kudumbasree unit working successfully. At this juncture it is wise to ask, do the government’s plans like Kudumbasree and its saving schemes match with the Paniya community’s vision of subsistence and their cultural specificities? However, the demand and struggles of the Paniya community was always for land as they see it as the base for a hunger free life.

The case of Kurichia women was better and one of their groups ‘Kathir Kudumbasree’ in Edavaka panchayat of Kurichia community won the prize for the best Kudumbasree in their panchayat. They were making umbrellas by taking loans and the panchayat bought and distributed them for school going Adivasi children and it was progressing well. The Kurichias did not find it difficult to pay the saving on time because they have land and they do cultivation and it is a support system for their daily expenditure. The chances of government jobs among them, though very rare, also contributed to their saving habit.

It is stipulated that Kudumbasree NHGs and ADS/CDS of Kudumbasree mission shall be associated in the implementation of the NREGS, in community mobilisation, capacity building, social audit and monitoring of processes relating to rights and entitlements of the workers. However, the workers in the NREGS reported that the ‘Kudumbasree mates’ of NREGS were appointed from Kudumbasree leaders by the respective ward members according to her/his choice and Kudumbasree was not actively involved in NREGS as they have no power in its planning and implementation. There were no reports from the field about challenging voices from the Kudumbasree in the planning processes of NREGS or in giving creative suggestions to make the work more vital and gender sensitive. Thus, Kudumbasree also becomes an active work force for the panchayat without decision making powers but involved in microfinancing. They were mainly involved in income generation for individual families and indirectly promoted capitalist development. Revival of traditional knowledge systems and the entire community’s development based on that were not reported in the study area. As Devika and Thampi (2011) point out these recent efforts have not advanced women’s mobility towards work and the potential of SHGs are limited.
Wayanad has won special attention at the national level for transparency and efficiency in implementing NREGS. For the State Employment Guarantee Council, an independent institution - Centre for Rural Management has conducted a study and they found that in Wayanad, contractors are not involved in NREGS and there is no corruption in the implementation process and that there is efficiency and transparency. However, during the study period, corruption was reported from a few areas and while enquiring the reason, the implementing authorities stated that there was practical difficulty in getting workers for Rs.125 per day for hard agricultural work and thus they had to make more people to sign the register to give them more wages. Here we cannot completely deny the rationality of the implementing authority because it is a plain truth that without even offering the minimum wage notified by the state for agricultural labour nobody will join for hard labour which needs special skill as well. At the same time, such manipulations although with good intentions can lead to corruption and lack of transparency if the social audit is not properly done.

In another panchayat in the study area, instead of employing people JCB was used for quick completion of a road. By using JCB, 15 days work may be completed within one day. However, the basic purpose of NREGS is deceived while using machinery to speed up the work. Using machinery will reduce the mandays of NREGS. However, people were given 50 rupees by calculating the mandays needed for the work without doing any work. This arrangement was accepted by the people but again a question remains. Were the poorest people were employed for the work and were they able to manage with 50 rupees per day? The goal of employment generation is forgotten even though people perceived it as a successful alternative as they received money without doing work. In spite of these irregularities, NREGS is perceived as a good initiative by the government for the rural poor by the common people in Wayanad as a whole. Even many of the Adivasi people, especially the Kurichias perceived it as a model scheme from the government as it gives employment guarantee for the poor and thus provides security to many. Also they noted that it is a great help to small scale farmers as the panchayat provides free labour to protect and cultivate their land which has remained barren.

48 In Kerala the minimum wages last updated by pay check India on March 5, 2011 for agricultural operation: For heavy work- Rs. 200/-; For light work- Rs.150/-.
However, enquiry into the implementation process and their subjective experiences brought out Adivasis’ grievances about the NREGS programme.

**Registration, Issuance of Job Cards and Work Participation**

The government has passed the Act in 2005 and the programme has come into force in February 2006. According to the official reports in 2009, out of 32491 scheduled Tribe (ST) families in Wayanad, 29141 families have registered in this programme and 28435 families were given job cards. Among those who registered, only 12146 have been given employment in 2007-2008 and the average employment per family was 25 days in a year (data collected from district NREGA office). The different categories were not mentioned in the NREGS registers and records and so separate data for Paniya and Kurichia communities were not available.

While visiting the sites in the month of February 2007, there were several Paniya households that did not have job cards. For example during the first visit to Arayal, only eight families out of 30 households reported that they had a job card. Many of them were interested in getting it and they criticised the Adivasi promoters and panchayat members for not giving them the job card. Quick investigation from the state planning board office revealed that job cards were not distributed to many Adivasi families in Thirunelli panchayat. The Officer’s timely interventions and threat of suspension of the panchayat Secretary helped to strengthen the monitoring and distribution of job cards to Adivasis and the situation improved slowly. The job card holders opened an account in the nearby branch of the Grama Panchayat and the payment of wages to the workers was through their bank accounts. This helped avoid corruption in payment of wages.

It has been observed that even after receiving the job cards, the Paniya community’s participation was minimal. For example, in Kunnil colony out of thirteen households, only one was going for *thozhilurappu* in the beginning stage despite having secured the job cards. They explained the reasons for their absence as lack of provision of receiving daily wages, inevitability to carry food to the work site and communication gap between the workers and organisers. It was against their practice of wage labour where they were provided with food as well as daily wages for their day to day expenditure. When they get the wage in the evening they go to the shop, buy rice and vegetables or fish and cook food
in the late evening. Unlike the non-Adivasis and the Kurichias, the Paniya community generally cooks only their dinner. If there is some left over rice they give it to their children the following morning and the adult members have their food from their employer’s house. Sudden transition to the necessity of carrying breakfast and lunch to the work site was against their practice and it affected their participation in the scheme. Further, in the beginning stage, there were complaints about lack of information regarding the work site and date. This reveals that the Paniya’s material needs and cultural specificities are not taken care of while planning the NREGS.

The Kurichias perceive this programme very positively and their participation in *thozhilurappu* was relatively better than that of the Paniyas. In the beginning stage of its implementation, priority was given to take up construction or repair work in public areas such as roads and *thodus* (rivers) and also on Adivasi lands. The Kurichias benefitted the most from this programme, especially the Kurichias living within the *tharavad* property. Tulsy *tharavad* reported that their ward got Rs. 5 lakh in 2007 for making mud walls on their land and they perceived it as a very useful programme. Again in 2008, they got Rs. 14 lakhs for their ward and they could give priority to the works on Adivasi land. The panchayat member of that ward was from Palottu Kurichia *tharavad* and this gave them more bargaining power. Another *tharavad* in the study area too received help for contour bunding and repairing their *thodu* through this programme. As the Paniya community does not have land, they could not access any of these entitlements except for their right to work and get the wages. Jayalakshmi, a panchayat member from the Kurichia community said,

I came first at the all India level in spending the highest amount of money on NREGs and conducting it satisfactorily. In 2009-2010 I had spent Rs. 50 lakhs in my Ward in Thavinjal panchayat. Out of Rs. 50 lakhs I could spend Rs. 30 lakhs in the Adivasi sector.

There was satisfaction for the Kurichias in that area as they could work in their locality, in their own *tharavads* and families. The panchayat member said that she could bring majority of the Adivasis in her area into this work. But she admitted that she failed to bring the two Paniya families in her ward to this work and she interpreted their absence as their pride and the possibility of getting more wages if they worked elsewhere. However, we cannot ignore the practice of purity/pollution existing between the Kurichias and the Paniyas.
While visiting Kunnil Paniya colony in September 2009, members of that community were found participating in *thozhilurappu*. They expressed many reasons for their increased participation. First of all an alternative arrangement for providing a small amount of Rs. 50 daily for meeting their day to day needs from their wages was implemented. One panchayat (Edavaka) had initiated this partial daily wage arrangement and entrusted its responsibility to the Area Development Society (ADS). Another reason for their increased participation was that work was arranged in the nearby areas and there was no need to carry lunch when they went for work. They came back to the house for 10’o clock tea as well as for lunch if it were prepared at home. Also the Kudumbasree mate who supervised the work for that period was a member from their own community and this gave them more enthusiasm to join.

Nima, a Paniya Kudumbasree mate reported:

There was no Kudumbasree mate from the Paniya community until now and according to the order from the centre to appoint Adivasis, I got the chance to become the supervisor for the first time.

Unlike the non-Adivasi dismissal of the Paniyas’ efficiency, she was found confidently supervising her work in the work site.

Dhuni, a Kurichiya Kudumbasree mate from Champa reported:

Paniyas need a daily wage for their sustenance and they did not opt for NREGS as in this scheme it takes a minimum 20 days to get the wage. There was an order to give Rs.50 daily but recently they have linked the daily withdrawal of wage with Kudumbasree and only Kudumbasree members can take this Rs.50 daily. Thus, again Paniyas are excluded as there are only very few members from Paniyan community in Kudumbasree.

The minimum arrangement done for the Paniya workers is again restricted to the few who have linkages with the Kudumbasree programme. Many Paniya women were not members of the Kudumbasree and it also kept Paniya men away from NREGS work. Another NREGS staff said that since the entire transaction of money in NREGS is computerized, it is difficult to give Rs.50 daily. If technology blocks the right of a Paniya to earn a minimum for his day to day survival, then it is definitely coercive and cannot be seen as unintentional. Thus, it was not according to the ideas, needs and the culture of the vulnerable Adivasi groups such as Paniyas in Wayanad.
Lack of Information in Labour Friendly Laws

There were no leaflets available regarding the rules of this programme in English or in Malayalam in the panchayats in 2007 during the pilot study. In September 2009, a handbook prepared by the District Assistant Programme Coordinator was available in the NREGS office. But on enquiry, it was revealed that this handbook was not distributed to any of the Paniya or Kurichia workers including the Paniya ADS. The level of awareness about the NREGS programme among Paniya group was minimal and almost nil in most of the cases. In the beginning stages, the Paniyas were not aware of even the purpose of getting the job card. Even after three years of its implementation, most of them do not know their right to demand a job and if the job was not available, then demand their right for unemployment allowance. They also did not know the other worker friendly rules and regulations in the Act such as the existence of social audit team, vigilance monitoring committee etc. to evaluate the programme as well as to address their grievances. The ADS from the Paniya community in Ward XII was also not aware of these rules and the toll free number to call and register their complaints. While observing the work in one panchayat, the Adivasis reported that at the time of social audit there was no ST member present in the social audit team even though their representation is compulsory according to the rule. The Paniya community was not at all aware that such an audit had happened in their ward.

Further, while attending the evaluation conducted by the Ministry of Rural Development on 30/9/2009 in one (Edavaka) panchayat, it was observed that there was no ST member to address their issues or to give suggestions for their benefit. Other non-Adivasi members were found very keen to give wrong information that Adivasis participation was almost 99 per cent and that they were fully aware of the benefits of this programme and so on. When the researcher enquired about the reason for no representation from then Adivasis, one panchayat member said that the meeting was fixed only on the previous day and the sudden change made by the evaluation team made it difficult to inform the Adivasis. But the Adivasis in the study area reported that they were not informed about any such meeting at all and that the panchayat was holding back information from the Adivasis to avoid conflict.

During the above evaluation, the panchayat president proudly claimed,
We are determined not to give unemployment allowance (and after reflecting for a second he corrected it as) I meant we find jobs for all job card holders.

He explained that first there was difficulty in finding work for all people with job cards but with the implementation of watershed programmes and extension of the scheme to include small farmers land there was plenty of work. On enquiry, it was found that this panchayat had not given unemployment allowance to any one and this was one of the model panchayats selected by the NREGS. But the following response reveals the smoke screen created by the panchayat. Mini from Kunnil colony stated,

In this colony we apply for work only when the ADS approaches us. ADS has to bring the application from the panchayat, then only we can apply for work.

She also said that the work was not offered as per their requirement. The Paniyas in the study area did not know that according to the Act, they could apply for work at their own will in the prescribed form or on plain paper. In the interview, Praveena (18 years) from Kunnil colony revealed that she was unaware of any laws regarding Thozhilurappu. She said,

The muster is to make sure that one is reaching for the work exactly at 8 am and wind up the work at 4.30 pm.

She does not dare to go for work if she is delayed, fearing the comments of ADS and other people. She is totally unaware of the facilities to be provided at the work site. Other workers were at least aware of that the muster roll was for marking their attendance but were unaware of the possibility of corruption by entering fake names of those who did not participate in the work to withdraw extra money. They did not know about the site diary and its use. Nobody from her colony was aware that a first aid box was necessary at the work site and they did not demand for it. Few of them reported that when they were repairing road, there were facilities like shade using tarpai (thick mat made of cloth), hot water in the flask and a first aid box. One day Mini cut her big finger while making a kayyala (contour bunding) in a farmer’s land. Since there was no first aid box, they could not do anything and she continued to work; the next day she was feverish and the finger was swollen with puss and she could not go to work. Further, it is observed that members from the Paniya community go in search of tools to neighbour’s houses and sometimes do not report to work due to unavailability of tools. They did not demand these tools from the panchayat even though it was their duty to provide and maintain tools for
*thozhilurappu* workers. Kurichiya labourers and Kudumbasree mates were more aware of their rights in NREGS and demand for necessary facility in the work site.

When the rules were explained by the researcher, the Paniyas were keen to listen and they started reading the handbook given by the researcher. They were of the opinion that nobody wanted to tell them the rules as the authorities wanted to exploit them and avoid questions and complaints. At the same time, the panchayat claimed in the evaluation that they spread awareness to Adivasis through Adivasi promoters, *Oorukoottam* meetings, *Kudumbasree Ayalkoottam* meetings and Gram Sabhas and that they all worked as an extension wing to reach out the benefits of this programme to the Adivasis. The Paniya workers, on the contrary, reported that *Adivasi* promoters seldom visited their colonies to discuss NREGS programmes. From one colony, they recollected that in 2009, the promoter visited the colony only to communicate that there was some free rice distribution by the Tribal Development Office.

According to some of the Paniya members, when the *thozhilurappu* scheme was introduced there was an *Oorukoottam* meeting and in 2008 and 2009 there were no *Oorukoottam* meetings in Ward XII in Edavaka panchayat which was selected as the model panchayat for NREGS. The researcher observed that in the Gram Sabha, the Paniya community members were usually absent or if present due to some special benefit (house, latrine etc) they were not free to talk or raise their issues. No space was given to include their opinions in the decisions. Nellan criticises the process of Gram Sabha and explains why they are silent in Gram Sabha. He reported:

> Only we get the information about the Gram Sabha at the last moment. When we reach there, we will not be prepared to talk as we are fully ignorant of the agendas beforehand. Non-Adivasis come there with pre planned decisions and they can respond in one minute. But we need one full day to discuss and express our ideas. But the Gram Sabha timing is from 2pm to 6 pm according to the rule and in reality when the registration gets over it will be 3.30 pm and the speeches of the panchayat leaders will take another long hour and there will not be any time left for discussion and by 5pm they will wind up the meeting.

On the contrary, in their traditional decision making they will not keep strict time schedules but take enough time for discussion, silent reflection and to reach consensus. Today their traditional forms of decision making has no place in bodies such as the panchayat Gram Sabha. Kurichia members are found more talkative and raising their issues in the Gram Sabha.
Is there any Preference for the Most Exploited?

One of the criteria for including Wayanad in NREGS programme is the presence of 17 per cent Adivasi population as it contributes to the high poverty index of the district. As mentioned earlier, the Paniyas constitute 40 per cent of the Adivasi population in Wayanad. In the study by the Centre of Excellence in 2006, the Paniya community was found to be one of the most struggling groups due to scarcity of wage labour.

Being the most exploited group for centuries, Paniyas deserve the first preference in \textit{thozhilurappu} programme. However, in the registers and reports, they have the list of work participation of different communities, but this is not produced separately for different Adivasi communities and they are all included in the ST category. Thus Paniya’s absence or irregularity is made invisible by the reporting procedures of the state department.

It appears that even NREGS, known as a radical scheme for the poor people did not synchronise with the Paniya community’s needs and their culture and tradition. Men and women from all the four Paniya colonies in the study area complained against the delay in wage payment and their inability to participate in it. They informed that Paniya men get Rs.150 to Rs.200 and food if they go for daily wage labour elsewhere. And for special jobs such as cutting trees, cutting and loading bananas they get Rs.250 to Rs.300 rupees in 2009. They face limitations in the wage rate but more than that the following narratives and observations give a clear picture about the process and their struggles to participate in a scheme purportedly meant for their welfare.

An 18 year old girl was going for work when she was having fever. She went and signed in the muster role at 8 am and started the work and later entrusted the work to her breast feeding mother and went to the hospital with her father. The doctor told her she had \textit{vilarcha} (local term used for anaemia) and gave medicine for fever and anaemia. After returning from the hospital she returned to her work and relieved her mother as the child was crying for her mother at home. In the interview, she said that she was forced to work as there is no other way to survive. She said,

\begin{quote}
I have started going for wage labour from Standard V onwards and in Standard VIII, I stopped going to school. As I have no grown up brothers and being the eldest in the family, I am the bread winner of 8 children, father, mother and grandmother. My father had a fall
\end{quote}
when he was young and he is not able to do manual labour. Occasionally, he does traditional healing practice and the earning from it is minimal as he does not demand anything from the patient except their offerings. Mother is having a 6 month old breast feeding child. During *thozhilurappu*, many times I felt giddiness and headache. But I continued the work silently as there was no use in saying anything to anybody other than completing the work. Sometimes, there is no rice left to cook and eat in the morning. If there is rice, there will not be firewood. At times I go for work without having food as I get a vomiting sensation when I eat the leftover food from the previous day.

While she was talking, the room was filled with smoke and her mother was trying to cook rice over some wet firewood pieces. Most of the farmers were not ready to contribute a small share by giving food to the workers even when they were receiving free labour from the panchayat. In the case of Paniyas, the notion of ‘wage labour’ and the rules of monetary economy cannot be implemented as their material and health conditions make them unfit for physical labour. Their physical conditions also reinforce their philosophy of living for the present, carried forward from their nomadic past.

Nellan (39) from Kunnil colony said,

*Njangal annanathe annathinuvendi nayikkunnavara* (we are people who work only for day today survival). We have nothing else other than this house and what we get daily as wage is the only source for our food. Since they are not providing daily wages, we have to shift between *thozhilurappu* and daily wage labour at regular intervals. This you can notice in the register. In the Adivasi column if she/he is present for two days she/he will be absent for next three days. In Edavaka panchayat this year they are giving Rs. 50 daily for Adivasis and that gave us motivation and our participation increased. But in my family there is only one member to work and ten members are dependant on that wage alone for daily survival. So it is impossible to survive on that and we buy on debt and give it back when we get the wages. Also we have to wait more than one month to get the wages after 14 days of work. The delay in wage payment affects our daily survival, but few among us managed to buy a bit of gold when we got the money together.

As Nellan’s sharing reveals, in the midst of all their struggles they are also slowly being drawn into the capitalist consumerist economy. One day when the researcher reached the site, Lakshmi (20) was busy in canvassing more people to join in a network chain because she would get a sari for Rs.70 if she convinced four more members to join the network. They asked the researcher also to join with them. Another lady, Ammini showed a small earring that she bought for her four year old child when she got the wage for *thozhilurappu*. In the midst of all their struggles for survival, their youth and children get attracted towards a modern lifestyle and started demanding modern dresses, shoes and food items and the parents become helpless and try to pacify them or suppress their
desires. And when they get the wages in lumpsum they try to spend money on such items compromising their food and health needs.

Members of the Paniya community said that shop keepers discourage them from thozhilurappu as they do not get ready cash for the grocery they sell to the Paniyas. When they go for daily wage labour they buy more items paying cash. A few of them stated that if they avail the thozhilurappu schemes they have to get the panchayat member to mediate with the shop keepers to sell grocery to them on debt. In one house there was rice to cook but no firewood and they were not able to go for thozhilurappu. If they want to go they have to spare one day to collect firewood. The farmer’s today chase Adivasis away saying that ‘let that firewood remain there, get decayed and become manure. One Paniya worker narrated that there was Noorakkizhangu (a root which Adivasis boil and eat) in the farmer’s land where they were digging while doing thozhilurappu work and asked his permission to pluck it. Even though the farmer did not use it as a food item, he did not give permission to the Paniya worker to pluck it. And the Paniya worker plucked it without the farmer’s notice. The Paniya narratives are filled with incidents of exclusionary practices of the non-Adivasis.

The Paniyas have maximum work opportunity from December to February and for Kurichias it is from November to February (Centre of Excellence 2006). Usually the NREG programme achieves momentum during this period since by March all the funds need to be spent and the expenditure statement has to be produced by April. According to the NREG Act, thozhilurappu is meant for the lean season but Adivasis reported that the panchayat did not stick to this rule. Usually Paniyas did not join for thozhilurappu leaving the wage labour they get on a regular basis in the months of November to March. However, many of the non-Adivasis who go for thozhilurappu are not regular wage labourers but subsistent farmers and they can respond to thozhilurappu at any time and this lessens the chance for Adivasis. Further, when the work in the small scale farmers’ land was included in thozhilurappu, the work opportunities for the Paniyas in the nearby areas becomes less; non-Adivasis also join for thozhilurappu knowing about the extra benefits in the scheme and the possibility of saving money. This again resulted in non-availability of daily wage labour for the Paniyas and forcefully pushed them to join thozhilurappu even though they preferred daily wage labour.
In Edavaka panchayat, mainly Paniya women from Kunnil colony reported that in 2008 and 2009, they got 25 days of work in the paddy fields for cultivation during the rainy season; even though cultivation is not allowed under this scheme, this work was included in the category of conversion of barren lands into cultivated fields. For men only seven days work was available. When all the paddy fields were getting converted to plantations as farmers were not able to make any profit out of rice cultivation, this eco-restoration programme introduced through NREGS by the Government of Kerala was much appreciated by the Adivasis even though it was not done on a large scale. There were also complaints from a few Paniyan women for including paddy cultivation in the NREGS programme as their work opportunity was reduced in areas where non-Adivasis also joined for the work. Further, 100 days work for a family is not a guarantee for a healthy life for the whole year, especially for the Paniyas who have no other material resources for livelihood. According to the Paniyas, the NREGS fails to provide them work during heavy monsoon and summer, the time they face acute famine.

**Conflict and Negotiations between Non-Adivasi Farmers and Adivasi Labourers**

It is a fact that the basic wage for an agriculture labourer and the wage for women labourers increased due to the implementation of NREGS in Wayanad. When women were given Rs.125 in NREGS, men demanded double the amount from farmers for work. When NREGS increased the wage to Rs. 160 recently, men demanded Rs.350 for ordinary labour and more for skilled and hard labour. Earlier, women’s labour was accessed at very cheap rates in Wayanad (around Rs.70 rupees) when NREGS fixed it as Rs. 125 and farmers were forced to pay that amount. Generally, farmers in Wayanad tend to blame the wage increase as a reason for their loss in agriculture instead of the agricultural policies based on liberal economic policies and the fluctuating global markets. However, the Kerala government has extended the NREGS to farmer’s landholdings of less than five acres as free service. This has pacified them partly even though farmers complain about the poor quality of NREGS work and the increase in wage due to its implementation. Even though farmers complain about the wage increase in NREGS, it still pays less than the minimum wage decided by the Kerala state.

On the other hand, Adivasis and small farmers reported that rich farmers with more than five acres also utilised the benefit of this scheme by acquiring utilisation certificate
from the panchayat for one acre or two acres of their bulk of land. However, the Paniya and Kurichia communities had minimum complaints against these farmers and the Paniyas even appreciated when some of them offered food once a day while working in their field. However, there were conflicts and lack of communication between the farmers and Paniya labourers. The following incident reveals that exploitation of the Paniya community even on the NREGS site.

In the morning Nima, a Paniya ADS from Kunnil colony came to call the Paniya workers for *thozhilurappu*. First they were hesitant to go for *thozhilurappu* saying that there is no money to buy rice and that they preferred to go for daily wage labour. But they got ready when she mentioned that it was necessary to conduct a meeting in the morning to fill the application for work during the next fifteen days. But when they reached the work site on October 1, 2009 at 8 am to work in a non-Adivasi farmers land, he was a bit hesitant to give them work that day because there was very low intensity rain and he suspected that the contour bunding they made on his land may not last. There was sign language between the farmer and a few non-Adivasis and they were just finding excuses not to give work on that day. They were purposely avoiding the open discussion in the presence of an outsider. Even though I had explained my research purpose and the need to observe the Paniya community at the work site, they were not fully at ease. The Paniya workers were sure that they wanted to work, because they had to give food to their children by evening and being late they could not go for any other work. They mentioned that there was no sign of heavy rain and asked the convener to decide on the measurements for the contour bunding. The convener Narayanan (who sells illicit liquor at home and exploit the Paniya community) started playing tricks to postpone the work. They waited for almost 45 minutes impatiently and started to return. The Paniya supervisor’s silence struck me and I provoked her by asking a question, ‘Does the supervisor have the power to take the decision in such conflicting situations?’ Then her silence was broken and she asked,

Who will listen if I ask them to do the work. Today my Adivasi friends wanted to go for daily wage labour and I compelled them to come for this work promising them to give at least Rs. 50 to buy rice in the evening. Now they could not go for other work and how can I face them again.
My presence among them was disturbing for the farmer and Kumaran and hesitantly, the farmer called them back and told them that he had no objection to their working in his land that day. After hesitating for a few minutes, the Paniya workers came back. When the measurement started again the farmer interfered by telling his familiar non-Adivasi women workers to stand where there was an old contour bund because there it needed only repair and that was easier than making a new bund. But that day, the Paniya women managed to stand near the old constructed bund and when the measurement was done for new bunds there was nobody to work there and the farmer did not have other option except to call his non-Adivasi workers. But the Paniya men insisted that they would help finish the work if women or other old people could not complete the work. When Nima was asked about her silence, she said,

They are my neighbours and I cannot make them enemies and survive there. So I kept quite even though I know it is my responsibility to facilitate in such situations.

Kurichia workers and their supervisors experienced more cordial relationship from the farmers and co workers. Bindu, a Kurichia Kudumbasree mate who supervises and help the workers said,

Workers know that I have lot of work at home. So they tell me that they will do the work and allow me to go and finish the work at home and come back to the work site for supervision and necessary services.

Farmers also had a complaint that there was labour scarcity as the agricultural labourers go for NREGS work. This can be dealt with if the work is planned in the lean season as stipulated in the rules. This complaint may have partial truth as the planning is not properly done in the neighbourhood groups and the panchayat Gram Sabha according to the report of the people. Panchayat members reported that there were initiatives to prepare a labour calendar to arrange NREGS works in the lean season. However, according to the report of the workers and field observation, it was evident that the implementation was not effective in arranging the work during the lean seasons. However, in practical terms panchayat members and the ADS together decide the work and the timings. When the NREGS work supervisor is informed by the panchayat member to apply for job, they give an application and it need not be the lean period for the labourers. Interviews of NREGS staff revealed that huge amounts of money were lapsing due to delays in the preparation of the labour budget and the implementation of
work on time. Since they were tied funds, they could not be used for any other purpose other than the stipulated work.

**NREGS and Gender Sensitivity**

The implementing agency of NREGS proclaims that it is gender sensitive and could attract many women workers. It is true that more women workers opt for *thozhilurappu* than men and there is provision for equal wage for men and women. The programme demands the same amount of work from the female and male workers when they pay equal wages. The authorities however claim that the work estimates are labour friendly. But a few Paniya women reported that repairing roads, making compost pits and trenches are too heavy for women and they become extremely tired by evening. They said that if their men do not join them for NREGS, it would be difficult for them to finish the estimated work. Men from the Paniya community generally like to opt for other daily wage work as they get more money. Men from other communities did not co-operate with the Paniya women to finish their share of work. Non-Adivasi men sometimes finished the work within three hours or half a day and left.

A pathetic scene in Kunnil colony showed an eight year old mentally retarded child tied with a rope at home when his mother went for work, as her 85 year old grandmother was not able to manage him alone. Under this scheme, there is provision to appoint a made servant for five children but if there are only one or two such children in a colony, what can be done? Carrying them to the work site may be more risky in such cases. Nimmi, the child’s mother from Kunnil colony reported,

Authorities are just concerned about our work and the targets but they do not see the daily struggle of Paniya women in day to day life. For me it is very difficult to finish all the household work with this sick child and reach the site on time. But NREGS officials are not sensitive to these daily struggles of women.

There is no concession in the amount of work assigned to women and even to handicapped people. If it is bund building, it is the same seven and half meters for women as well as for men. If it is compost pit or water trench, it is the same measure for men and women. Also in NREGS the tools provided are not suitable for women. Even weak Adivasi girls (from 18 years onwards) were seen struggling to lift the heavy spade to make mud walls and compost pits. Women from the Paniya community, especially the
weaker ones, said that they preferred daily wage labour as there was no compulsion to finish the work in time. Also in daily wage labour, the employer’s households provide food and it reduced the risk in going for work on an empty stomach. But the call of their stomach, forced them to go in for even hard labour. However, it is true that in daily wage labour, they pay less for women. But the work expected from them is also less and they are not given very hard jobs such as making compost pits, mud walls and trenches. It is very important to arrange specific work plans for women considering their work load at home as well as the bodily conditions if NREGS claims to be gender sensitive.

Before going for wage labour, women have to draw water, cook food and pack food for lunch and send children to school. But there is no time concession for her in NREGS. For Paniya women, there is the extra burden of fetching firewood and water from faraway places during the dry season. They have to spare one full day to collect firewood for the following two days. This is an important reason for the Paniyas’ lack of interest in participating in NREGS. However, these contextual specificities are not a concern of NREGS while fixing the timings or workload for women.

A panchayat member from Kurichia community stated that she managed to reduce the work load of old people individually or by assigning work in groups. Such arrangements are not reported in the case of women anywhere in the study area. Special consideration is needed for Adivasi women folk as they are facing the double vulnerability of poverty and ill health. Specific work plans and tools have to be designed for women to make it more gender sensitive as women constitute the main work force in NREGS. According to recent (2012) reports from a previous NREGS staff, discussions have started to make NREGS more women friendly by designing special work plans and special equipment which suits the anatomy of women and there are plans to assign work load according to gender, age and disability.

**Labour Market and Increasing Gender Disparity**

The traditional ways of food gathering and the subsistence agricultural practices and economies that prevailed among Adivasis were supportive to women and gave them better status. Women and men were jointly responsible for the subsistence production
among the Adivasi population in Wayanad and women were respected for their economic contribution.

The capitalist mode of agriculture based on colonial and neo-liberal policies and the conversion of paddy fields resulted in lack of employment especially for Paniya women. As a result, women’s economic dependence on men increased both for personal needs as well as family needs. As they were experts in paddy cultivation, paddy planting, weeding and harvesting assured them almost three months of work to Paniya women until the 1990s. They suffered the most due to the destruction of paddy fields and the transformation into cash crop gardens or for construction works.

In Wayanad, in the past as well as today, the wage difference among men and women is an accepted fact among all categories of people. Even with this disparity in wage, Paniya women had economic independence due to the wage labour available to them mainly in the paddy fields. They had the freedom to use their earnings as they wished unlike in the other non-Adivasi communities. However, the sudden fall in their incomes reduced their expenditure for food items and affected their health status. According to Paniya women’s narrations, Paniya men’s domination over them increased as labour opportunities became scarce for women increasing their economic dependency on their men. The gender division of labour is getting strengthened by the conversion of paddy fields and the loss of labour opportunities for Paniya women.

Among Paniyas, the household chores such as cooking, drawing water, bringing firewood etc. were shared by men to a greater extent until around thirty to forty years back. Paniya women said that if they go for outside work, men used to complete all the household tasks and vice versa. I have observed old Paniya men involved in cooking more frequently than the younger generation. Nowadays, the Paniya youth are also influenced by the non-Adivasi world which is projected as a superior way of life, with its gendered division of labour within families and work place. One day a Paniya youth said, “Drawing water is not my work, but I am helping her. Even then she does not give me due respect and obey what I say”. It was observed that the Paniyas are increasingly entrusting the responsibility of cooking, cleaning, washing, fetching water and caring for the small ones to the girl child. However, chores such as going to the market and buying and selling things, they entrust to boys as well as girls. As a whole, boys are found freer
from household responsibilities than girls and patriarchal norms are penetrating into Paniya culture in socialising their children.

When NREGS promoted equal wages for men and women, men started demanding more wage as the disparity still exists in the open labour market. While discussing with Adivasi men, it was revealed that there were men who were against the practice of equal wages for men and women. This reveals the public patriarchy existing in the society which underplays the overload on women in managing the household and bringing up the children and its influence and slow incursion into Adivasi communities. The societal norms that construct women’s manual work as less efficient is very strong in Wayanad and men are not ready to see the oppression of women through disparity in wage labour.

In Wayanad, women’s work was considered very cheap and they were paid only Rs.70 till the implementation of NREGS. Even though the state implemented laws for equal wages, the wage rate in NREGS is less than the minimum wage decided by the state. So most of the Adivasi men keep away from NREGS and women become the main work force and they are forced to do hard labour like road construction and trench making even without earning the minimum wage notified by the state. However, the capitalist patriarchal system confines women to the household or extracts her labour power by paying minimum wage. Men’s demand for double the wages of women shows the grave disparity that exists in wages and these values are entering into Adivasi culture. As Sankaran (2009) points out, it is unreasonable to delink the relation between wage levels and the existence of forced labour and he highlights that not providing minimum wage is violation of Article 23 of the Constitution. Thus, it appears that the difference in the quantum of work alone cannot address the gender disparity but the ethical consideration of women’s extra work load in the household and her specific bio-social experiences such as multiple pregnancies, chronic aneamia, abortions and miscarriages have to be an important factor in deciding her wages and her workload to do justice to Adivasi women, especially the Paniya women.

On the other hand, it was observed that Kurichia woman had no leisure time as they were confined to the household from morning till evening. Along with the household responsibilities, they had to support their men who worked in their fields, especially for paddy cultivation. Kurichia men generally did not support women in their household
tasks but helped in cooking and cleaning if the women in the family were menstruating. The younger generation was also socialised in the same manner and girls were trained for household duties such as cooking, cleaning and boys for shopping and feeding the cattle. Even after doing a great share of work at home, the women were totally dependent economically on men. Some of the Kurichia women were interested in availing themselves of the opportunities offered by the NREGS to escape their complete dependence on men for money to meet their personal and family needs. Thus, the gendered division of household labour and women’s dependence on their men in a tharavad based agricultural occupation was well entrenched in the Kurichia community.

The disintegration of traditional agriculture and the incursion of the capitalist system and market economy were disempowering to women in the Kurichia community. Krishna, from Palottu Kurichia tharavad reported that in punam cultivation, women had more participation and decision making power than in settled agriculture. Preparing the forest land for cultivation by cutting and burning the bushes was mainly done by men but sowing and continuous caring was women’s duty and the goddess Vadakkathy Amma was specially venerated in the rituals before punam cultivation. But in settled agriculture, men’s role is prominent than women’s. Kurichia women are restricted from even touching the plough. Women’s labour outside the household is more restricted today than in the punam cultivation period. Nathan (1997) observes that when the agriculturist-gatherer tribe settled down as land owning agriculturists, they tended to adopt gender practices of Caste Hindus and seclusion of women become a symbol of higher status. For instance, even entering the tharavad temples is restricted for Kurichia women. Devika and Thampi (2011) point out that spacial norms regulated the movement of upper caste women and in the study area it was true in the case of Kurichia Adivasi women too. Kurichia men had superiority over the religio-cultural and political decision making related to their tradition. Women were not allowed even to touch the bows and arrows that Kurichia men used for their ritual hunting. Even small boys were provided with bows and arrows for playing and practicing, but girls were not allowed to touch them during the ritual practices on Tulam 10, an auspicious day. However, both their girls and boys participated in the school archery competition and girls got a chance to practise archery at home even though they were banned from participating in ritual hunting. Thus, while
private patriarchy is enforced, they are willing to underplay public patriarchy in order to enhance their community’s opportunities at the societal level.

Paniya women reported that migration to Kodagu for wage labour made their men alcoholics and men lost respect for their women. There were also incidents of men bringing women from Kodagu and deserting them after one year and bringing another woman on the next trip to Kodagu. Thus, lack of employment opportunities in the locality and the struggle for day to day survival was making women more vulnerable to men’s violence. It affected the Paniya women’s status in the family as well as in wider society. When men’s support in family matters reduces, women have to get into debt for their daily sustenance. There were also incidents of women going for domestic labour to nearby towns as well as distant cities occasionally to meet their financial needs. The advance amount that employers offer is the incentive to go for such work which is exploitative in nature. There is no protection for such women labourers with respect to wage or physical security. There were incidents of sexual exploitation of women who were recruited for domestic work. In Thirunelli, Arayal colony, the Anganwadi helper who stayed in the colony reported one recent case of sexual exploitation but the woman was hesitant to discuss the matter with outsiders. In Kunnil colony, another girl Milha was asked to go for domestic work 6 km away from her house. She was promised Rs. 1500 for looking after one child. The family who requested for help was their earlier landlord’s relative. She went for work and after four days, she came back due to the misbehaviour of one of their relatives. Milha described how she was harrassed,

One of their male relatives came and secretly said to me that he would come at night and that I had to open the door for him. I hesitated and there was nobody around and he held my hand tightly. Somehow I escaped from there. That day I tried to contact my relative Nima on the phone but they did not allow me to talk. Then I asked them to reach me home immediately. They also harassed me by scolding me for not eating the previous day’s food. They tried calling me a thief saying that I took their mobile phone and dress. I was entrusted with all the work - cleaning, washing clothes, washing plates, taking care of the child etc. Next day, they brought me back in a jeep and before reaching the house, I wanted to get down. They stopped the jeep according to my suggestion, but before I got out from the jeep, they started the jeep and I fell down. My head and knees hit a stone. I was admitted into a hospital and treated, but I still feel giddy and suffer from headaches.

Nima, an active member of the community and the girl’s relative filed a complaint and the police came to enquire while she was in the hospital. Milha could not say anything being frightened of the police and Nima was not present during the enquiry. Nima wanted
to proceed with the case even though the employers promised compensation and settled the case in her absence. Nima reported that all her non-Adivasi neighbours discouraged her saying that “she is a girl, her future will be spoiled if the news is spread and she may not get married”. Nima then wanted to file a case at the Women’s cell and took the initiative. Again, she was discouraged by non-Adivasis who said, “Do not destroy the future of that girl”. Nima said that, even detailed check up or scanning was not done for her. They just paid the hospital charges and even the compensation was not fully paid. Nima did not know how to proceed with the case and nobody supported her; non-Adivasis again advised her “nothing has happened to the girl by the grace of god and there is no need to dig it again and make it an issue”.

The gender constructions of the non-Adivasis clearly indicate the patriarchal norms and the brutal exploitation of Paniya women using these constructions. Non-Adivasis are slowly transferring their cultural norms of women’s subordinate sexuality to the Paniya community while exploiting their bodies and labour power. Lack of support to access available legal aid and lack of legislation and state policies to protect domestic labourers restricted the Paniyas’ fight against injustice. However, even in the KILA survey mentioned earlier in the chapter, domestic wage labour of women is not included as a category while enumerating different categories of labour and this again shows the gender disparity existing in the public sphere.

The Kurichia women mainly depend on their own land for vegetable and paddy cultivation and this gave them better availability of food and also status in the eyes of the non-Adivasis. The Kurichias’ self cultivation practices became a real support to meet the family’s food needs and reduced the vulnerability of women. The women’s ability to contribute to their families’ economy due to their access to land is a significant factor in determining the status of Kurichia women. The relatively better self sufficiency in the Kurichia household gave them more public acceptance than Paniya women who depend on wage labour and debt from non-Adivasis, employers and shop keepers for their sustenance. Non-Adivasi constructions, like Kurichia women have ‘adyathwam’ referring to aristocracy, are an example. Kurichia families in the study area reported that they did not send their women for domestic labour and that they were saved from the possibility of harassment related to such labour.
It emerges that the custom of equality between the sexes which was the hallmark of the Paniya community is slowly diminishing today due to labour scarcity, increasing division of labour and violence by men folk. Kurichia women are also affected with the imposition of restrictions on their mobility through their custom, traditions and sexual norms. The Sanskritisation process gives momentum to establish control on women’s labour through taboos and rigid ritual practices restricting outside labour and mobility in the case of Kurichias.

**Extension of Bondedness and Slavery**

Livelihood issues of Adivasis in Wayanad are increasing due to labour scarcity and the various forms of alienation they experience in the labour market. As Marx (1992) observes they experience alienation from the product of their labour as well as from the productive activity as they are not producing for themselves and their consciousness is not involved in the production process. They work under surveillance, control and coercion and this leads to further alienation from their own fellow beings. The Paniyas being devoid of any means of production, experience alienation in all its forms. More than the material alienation, the work itself becomes alien to them as it does not align with their cultural norms and as their creativity and decisions according to their cultural specificities are not involved in it.

For the Paniyas, Kodagu labour becomes the most exploitative experience as even the place, people, labour, everything is alien to them in the physical as well as mental realms as they have migrated to another culture which keeps them bonded with an issuance of an advanced amount. As mentioned earlier, the brutality and coercion intensifies their experience of alienation and marginalisation. In the case of Kurichias, the minimum subsistence agriculture gives them chance to think and for creative interventions but the capitalist cultivation practices based on profit has an alienating effect on their culture of subsistent community based agricultural production processes and they experience value conflict and another kind of alienation. The KILA survey (2008) reflects that only 694 Adivasi oorus (Adivasi colonies) out of 2167 oorus continue their traditional agriculture. The Kurichia tharavads in the study area reported that they still follow their traditional agricultural practices. At the same time, they mentioned that when all non-Adivasis around them follow modern agriculture using pesticides and chemicals, it is difficult to
continue their traditional ways as there are more chances of pest attacks on their fields and besides they do not have government support. Thus, the transition is forced on them in indirect ways.

The question that arises is does NREGS help in any way to ameliorate the alienating nature of labour or does it increase the alienating effect of agriculture and labour? The Kurichias as well as the Paniyas expressed that they are against the work being currently undertaken to preserve thodu (small river) in many areas as they are removing all the plants (kaitha, eetta, chembu etc.) on its sides and banks and building stone walls in the name of protecting the thodu. The Paniyas said it may cause much damage to thodu as the roots of the plants preserved the sides from falling. Besides, it destroys the Paniyas’ last reserve of food items like chembu and leafy vegetables on the river banks. All these point to the absence of any holistic plan in selecting useful immediate employment. Without a long-term vision for this programme, the Adivasis feel the consequences acutely.

During my visit to the area in 2007, many women were found involved in digging trenches in the forest to prevent elephants from entering the cultivated land. They complained that it was very difficult to work continuously, since it was hard labour. If the land was hard and rocky, it was very difficult to dig. It was a very strenuous job for women. The Central government is against trench making, but the Kerala government continues this work, including it under soil conservation and water conservation category. The soil conservation officer in Kalpetta says that trenches will be helpful for the areas, which come under the same contour. Wayanad being a place of hills and paddy fields, it may not come in the same contour and not serve the purpose of soil and water conservation. Rajan, a forest guard from the Adivasi community pointed out that the concept of trench making itself is wrong and unscientific. According to Rajan, water percolation trenches help only to create some job opportunities and do not reduce the man animal conflict as envisioned by the implementing officers. In addition, he pointed out that in all other states, there is plenty of common land and it is not difficult to find jobs for the people. In Wayanad since there is not enough common land for implementing NREGS, the government has taken up digging trenches, which is not good for forest conservation. He opined that the Forest Department was trying to pacify the farmers who
complained against wild animals destroying their cultivation. The work they are forced to do is contradictory to their understanding of what needs to be done. All these reflect the unproductive nature of NREGS work.

The Paniyas appreciated the reconversion of paddy fields for paddy cultivation instead of keeping it barren, which was initiated by the panchayat under NREGS. However, this was only for one year and that was done by including uncultivated paddy lands under the head of ‘employment in barren land’. However, paddy cultivation is becoming a rare occupation and the area under paddy cultivation reduced drastically as it is not profitable and thus this intervention of the panchayat though in a very limited area can be considered a creative intervention. As the Adivasis immediately sensed and appreciated this work, the rejuvenation of paddy fields for rice cultivation on a large scale can become an innovative and productive intervention in NREGS with proper planning. Besides, it can become a motivation for Paniya people to join NREGS. This can also bring back paddy fields and its natural environment for the Paniyas to fetch food items for their daily needs and also become a way of acknowledging and valuing their knowledge and skill in agriculture and their lost vitality in labour activities. Through introducing traditional cultivation practices, the clean natural water sources and pure environment can be restored and the goal of environmental conservation could be achieved.

It emerges that lack of facilitation in assuring the Paniyas of their participation in the decision making and implementation process still exists. There is need to relook at the gender sensitivity aspect including criteria like quantum of work, timing, the problems they face at home etc. without sticking only to womens’ participation and wage equality. However, there is hope since evaluation and creative interventions are slowly emerging from the authorities. When the government gives the propaganda that it is not a project but a ‘magnacarta’ for the poor people, it has to become more humane in many aspects and include the most deprived sections. For instance, hundred days employment guarantee without even giving the minimum wage may not be enough for a family to meet their livelihood needs as nine months are lean seasons of employment, especially for the Paniyas. The Paniya community from Kunnil participated in a strike conducted in the panchayat to increase the wage from Rs. 125 to Rs. 160 per day and there was a promise to increase the wage to Rs. 160 by the government. (In 2012, they reported that they were
receiving Rs.160 if they went with the tool, otherwise Rs. 150 as the supervisors deduct Rs. 10 as rent for the tool).

It emerges from the discussion that NREGS is not suitable to the Paniya culture and lifestyle and they fail to access the benefit of the scheme. They are alienated from the product of labour as well as from the process of labour. On the contrary, the landedness and representation in the panchayat helped the Kurichias to avail themselves of the programme as they get minimal opportunities for planning the work in their land, and thus minimizing the alienating effect on them. However, at least for increasing the participation of the Paniyas, context specific micro level planning, monitoring and vigilance by educated Adivasi youth who are aware of all the labour friendly laws of NREGS, appointment of Paniya Kudumbasree mates, provision of a minimum amount of Rs.100 on a daily basis respecting their philosophy of living for the day etc. may be helpful. It emerges that the heterogeneity of different Adivasi communities were not addressed in the NREGS programme.

Thus, NREGS if planned properly can ameliorate the labour scarcity of Adivasi folk and the trauma they face while migrating to other states for employment. What is lacking is micro planning in the specific context of the most vulnerable Adivasi communities and the political will to radicalise its rules and regulations to meet the felt needs and cultural specificities of different Adivasi groups.

**Conclusion**

It emerges that Paniyas still stay bonded in the minds of non-Adivasis and it is manifested in their everyday constructions, conflicts and actions towards them. Historically, exploiting the slave labour of Paniyas for many years, non-Adivasi minds are obsessed with dehumanising constructions and actions towards them. Continuing dependency, debt and advance money are new tools of bondage for them even though they are free from bonded labour through the enactment of law. Provision of alcohol and drugs is another tool invented by non-Adivasis to keep them bonded and in a wretched condition for ever. So what the Paniyas undergo today is another incarnation of slavery. In the capitalist monetised economy, there is legal sanction for surveillance through the domination of money capital as the Hindu temple used moral discourse as the legitimising tool.
Valliyoorkavu is no more the centre for slave trade but the religious institutional set up that still uses the discourse of ‘laziness’, ‘idleness’, ‘right’, and ‘debt to god’ to legitimise control and extract manual labour in nuanced ways. The ideological constructions cover up the bondage and make it appear like a normal occurrence. Even the NREGS programmes limit the Adivasi self realisation in economic, social, cultural and political levels and contribute to the alienation they experience, especially in the case of the Paniya community. Also the narratives revealed the unproductive nature and lack of creativity in NREGS work. It is evident that the creativity and enthusiasm of Adivasis is underutilised in NREGS. The motivation is to employ as many people as possible for any kind of work and the delay in planning reduces the scope to make it more creative, productive and environmental friendly. Even with all these flaws, Adivasi narratives reveals the hope that they still have in NREGS programmes and this stresses the need to improve Adivasi participation in NREGS in Kerala through micro planning, considering the heterogeneity and specific contexts of different Adivasi groups.

The hierarchical caste and class structures, master servant relations and the paternalistic state entities are involved in perpetuating a different kind of bondedness in invisible ways unlike the plain and brutal ways of the past slavery. For the Kurichias, their institution of tharavad, their landedness and lack of dependency due to their subsistent agriculture created minimum space for dialogue with the power structures and achieve political representation which assigns a symbolic power. It is true that agriculture faces a great threat in the neo-liberal context and its income is very limited. At the same time, Kurichias landedness and agriculture give them security by providing minimum livelihood and belongingness in their cultural traditions. However, the government employment is minimal and does not give the Kurichias any decision making power as they are appointed in low ranks as in the case of Indian clerks appointed by the colonial rulers for the smooth ruling of an alien country. However, it can contribute a small share in reducing the alienation they experience in their tryst with different administrative structures. In contrast, the total dependent relations of Paniyas due to landlessness and lack of minimum livelihood, the experience of alienation and marginalisation becomes more intense for them. The KILA survey report also affirms that majority of the Paniyas and Kurichias work in the agricultural sector and reveals the importance of land for these two communities. The next chapter will explore the patterns of landownership of the
Paniyas and Kurichias, their access to land and the land relations in detail to understand the material and cultural significance of land in their development or lack of development.