

October 2020

## “Valli” at the border: Adivasi women de-link from settler colonialism paving re-enchantment of the forest commons

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### Recommended Citation

Kozhisseri, Deepa (2020). “Valli” at the border: Adivasi women de-link from settler colonialism paving re-enchantment of the forest commons. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 21(7), 139-152.  
Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol21/iss7/11>

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## **“Valli” at the border: Adivasi women de-link from settler colonialism paving re-enchantment of the forest commons**

By Deepa Kozhisseri<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

The forests of Attappady Hills part of the Western Ghats in Kerala homeland to Adivasi people is a frontier region where a settler population is now predominant. This paper aims to bring the concept of borders as a heuristic device to interpret gender-ecology-indigeneity in Attappady. The conversations among Adivasis, between Adivasis and settlers, between Adivasi women and their children become in media res dialogues of their border subjectivity. This was an empirical study in Attappady in which life experiences, oral history and myths were studied using narrative analysis. The paper discusses four findings: First how land dispossession disproportionately impacted Adivasi women. Second the gradual increase of elopement and its linkage with land dispossession among women and loss of commons. Thirdly the collapse of the household due to alcoholism and Adivasi women's social movement to protect their oikoumene. Fourthly the rupture of gender agriculture foodways and how women are running community kitchens for nutritious meals. The Attappady hills that were once denuded have regenerated although the region is prone to recurrent droughts and floods. In the midst of these climate change challenges and agrarian distress both these forests and Adivasi women are uniting from their border position and showing signs of being mutually constituted in renewal. While narratives of “enchantment” can serve as technologies of power it argues that critical border thinking has to be accompanied by visions of “re-enchantment” of the commons. Flows of knowledge are in media res between enchantment, critical enchantment and re-enchantment. Epistemic potential for this re-enchantment comes from the convergence of decolonial feminist epistemologies of geo politics, body territory and indigenous feminisms with ecofeminism. The emergent affective interrelation shows co-production of place and people. Finally, a grounded approach is recommended for strengthening women's collectives and multifunctional land use planning to ensure gender equity in access to natural resources.

*Keywords:* Gender, Ecology, Decoloniality, Kerala, India, Indian women, Adivasi women, feminism, Indigenous feminism

### **Introduction**

*“As an indigenous feminist I intend to recover the philosophical principles of my culture and to make them fit into the reality of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I would also recover the double vision or the idea of the cabawil, the one who can look forward and back, to one side and the other, and see the black and white, all at the same time,” Alma Lopez<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> Alma Lopez is a Quiche woman and council member from Guatemala. This is her quote in Duarte Bastian 2002,18 and translated by Castillo Hernandez (2010).

*“If we are not called Valli, then what will we be as a people?” Adivasi girl from Attappady Hills on the ubiquity of this name that means vine and Adivasi<sup>3</sup> identity.”*

These two voices one from Latin America and the other from Attappady Hills a frontier region of Kerala, South India are resounding in their similarity to find moorings in the philosophical basis of their people as even with all scientific advancements the planet hurtles into an uncertain future. Valli was back home in the forest village of Galassy in the high ranges of Attappady during her college break. She studies science while her family and kin are swidden farmers who also collect honey from the forest at night to avoid animals. Her life is in media res between indigenous forest knowledges and scientific rationality<sup>4</sup>. “Valli” or vine in Malayalam is a popular name amongst the Adivasis of Attappady and today they are new vines negotiating their indigenous knowledge, indigeneity and environmental subjectivity. Simultaneously with these Vallis secondary forests have emerged in these hills of the Western Ghats. Although afforestation has brought regeneration, inadequate rain has led to most giving up agriculture in Attappady. *These Adivasis were once able to forecast these showers from clouds by observing animals and plants. In Attappady they prayed to Goddess Maarie for rains.*<sup>5</sup> Attachment to land and worship of nature, however runs the risk of becoming “eco-incarceration” as it often commoditized and simplifies the relationship between class struggle and indigenous activism (Shah, 2012). This “borderland” or blurred boundary<sup>6</sup> between Adivasi and Non-Adivasi, forest and non-forest is a constant dialectic between knowledges. In this paper border is both a metaphor and methodological tool to understand forces of gender, ecology and indigeneity in Attappady Hills. Border writing in Emily Hicks work refers to the “difference in the reference codes between two or more cultures” expressing “bi-conceptual reality<sup>7</sup>.” It draws on the Chicana idea of border subjectivity or heterogeneity of identity. The other objective of this article is to bring out the in-media res nature of the discourse that indigenous women are having across time and place. Some of the Adivasis have switched from swidden to sedentarized cultivation over just one generation and are dependent on the forest. Their lives, however, are also enmeshed just as much in new circulation of commodities and networks with interventions of markets and state. Indigenous women especially in South America have been protesting against the twin exploitation of patriarchy and capitalism. The Zapatista women who came out with a charter for indigenous women in 1994 have pointed that struggles against sexism, racism and economic exploitation go together (Hernández Castillo, 2010). There is a gap in addressing coloniality experienced by vast numbers of indigenous women in the capitaloscene. There is a need for feminism for producing knowledge from below and to left considering there has been so much impact of extractivism on women and

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<sup>3</sup> In this paper I use terms indigenous, Adivasi and tribal interchangeably. While indigenous people are the themselves Adivasis an identity of self-esteem. Attappady’s communities referred to themselves as Adivasis while amongst themselves they use Irula, Kurumba or Muduga.

<sup>4</sup> While stereotypes of the Adivasis “living close to nature” with “indigenous cosmologies” are built into the Kerala state’s development approach and in political speeches while their relationship with the forest department inverts this stereotype as bearers of indigenous knowledge. Radhika Krishnan and Rama Naga argue in *South Asia* while studying resistance movements in Niyamgiri and Jagatsingpur “performances of indigeneity” play a crucial role in establishing communities as “ecological defenders.” Forest dwellers who are increasingly Adivasis and Non-Adivasis in South India either take on or resist environmental subjectivities.

<sup>5</sup> C R Rajagopalan and Manju Vasudevan, *Summer Rain: The roots of indigenous knowledge in Kerala*, Centre for Innovation in Science and Social Action

<sup>6</sup> For the limits of seeing Adivasis as the only authentic forest dweller see *Blurred Boundaries, Identity Rights in Forested Landscapes of Gudalur*, Manasi Karthik and Ajit Menon, *Economic and Political Weekly*, March 5, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> See *Millennial Anxieties: Borders, Violence and the Struggle for Chicana Subjectivities*, Arturo J Aldana, *Arizona Journal of Hispanic Culture Studies*, 1998

indigenous people (Schild, 2019). This paper is an attempt to address coloniality as experienced by Adivasi women facing patriarchal structures and loss of natural resources.

Critical border thinking is a tool in decoloniality which links different kinds of exploitation and opens to hybridity. Borders are also liminal places where gender and indigenous identities interact and are coproduced. Adivasis in this border area are under settler domination decolonial framework aided in the interpretation. This paper discusses four findings of this study; First Adivasi women became the conduit for land loss with settler colonialism and land dispossession impacted them the most. Second most of the marriages are by elopement among them which has led to land loss among the women. Third with alcoholism and domestic violence affecting them these Adivasi women have led a social struggle against this in defense of their bodies and communities. Fourthly the failure of agriculture has destroyed subsistence agriculture and traditional foodways. Adivasi women have however been running community kitchens to revive their food cultures creating in a way autonomous spaces from which to challenge agrarian capitalism (Federici & Linebaugh, 2018). The Attappady Hills that were once denuded have substantially regenerated and the discovery of a frog species recently indicates potential for biodiversity (Dinesh, KP et al 2020). The fate of these Adivasis, and the forests are closely tied in Attappady hills (Kozhisseri, 2019). Both Adivasi women and the forest are coming together from their border positions in the midst of agrarian capitalism and climate change. Indigenous epistemologies are relational to the world and based on the collective (Kovach, 2015). This paper explores the epistemic potential in the convergence of decolonial feminist epistemologies with ecofeminism. Could Adivasi women and forests renewing themselves in Attappady suggest a relational co-becoming? Exchanges between environmental justice and degrowth movements foster pluriverse world making and bridging of North South binaries (Singh, 2019). While a decolonial imaginary has been preoccupied with binaries a post capitalist post-colonial imaginary is a shift from authenticity to hybridity and borders to border crossings (Ed Pieterse, 1995). This paper tries to address coloniality and structures of power as experienced by the Adivasi women as feminized colonized bodies in relation to their changing forest habitus.

### **Borderlands of Attappady and vulnerability of its Adivasi women**

Social democracy in Kerala was ushered by the elected left government with land reforms and workers legislations. These social advances were held up as Kerala Model of Development. It got scholarly attention due to its high social development indicators of literacy, health, low infant and maternal mortality coupled with low economic development. However these reforms were not entirely egalitarian and lead to exclusion of Dalits and Adivasis from productive resource (Devika, 2010). The 20th century shaped new but intensely patriarchal norms leading to limited extent of women's access to resources (Kodoth & Eapen, 2005). The decomposition of the state gender level index which places Kerala above other states masks the poor employment profile of women in the state. The state is continuing to witness negative trends in women's property rights, rapid growth and spread of dowry and rising gender-based violence. Conventional indicators relating to education and health have failed to elevate women from their subordinate status within the household in Kerala's villages (Scaria, 2014). Scaria's study found even the state sponsored poverty alleviation programme for women, Kudumbashree had failed to empower them. Adivasis are the other outliers of the Kerala Model of Development. Spatial politics of internal colonialism work together to the disadvantage of tribes and regions (Shah Alpa and Lerche, 2020). Attappady is a backward region of Kerala and there has been high incidence of malnutrition and infant mortality among its Adivasi women (Alungal, 2014). Settlers have gradually become numerically preponderant in this indigenous homeland. In 1951 the area was 90% tribal and by 2001 tribals were just 40.9%. In

the 2011 census there are 32,956 Adivasis in 192 oorus of this 9370 are Irular, 666 are Kurumbar and 980 are Mudugas. The total population is 64,318 and Adivasis are 44 percent of the population according to the ITDP.

Attappady Hills was homeland of the Adivasis and came under the Zamorin of Cochin till the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The zamorin appointed three Nair chieftains or “*janmis*” for the administration of this frontier area. Adivasis of Attappady practiced swidden cultivation, foraged for tubers and collected honey. Annually a portion of their harvest, honey and other forest produce was levied as land revenue to the janmis. Towards the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century timber extraction for railways began in these forests with the East India Company gaining control of major parts of the area. “*The Whiteman came into the forest and scattered coins. Adivasis followed them clearing the shrubs and picking up the coins,*” he recalled. During the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century ownership of the forests were transferred to state governments, large parts retained by janmis and the private forests were nationalised. When the Land Reform Act of 1969 the janmis started selling of their land to avoid surrender to the government. This brought in settlers who further drove out the Adivasis. Chetty and Gounder settlers began to arrive in Attappady in the 50’s -60’s and there was large scale dispossession. Forest-dependent communities who view land in terms not so much of ownership but of use were divested of their lands. Agriculture coexisted with hunting, foraging as well as swidden and the shift to sedantarisated agriculture was not complete. Colonial power strengthened the state in controlling wilderness and unknown people. The shift to sedantarisated cultivation however lead to hunting gathering communities losing out on their diverse food webs and their excessive dependence on intensive agriculture. Domiciled women on a diet of grain were likely to be more anemic (Scott, 2017). Attappadys Adivasi women are also disadvantaged by multiple vulnerabilities.

### **Gender, Place and Border Thinking**

This paper takes as its starting point the concept of borders which implies hybridity between geographies and cultures. When two or more cultures edge each other, this creates apart from the “physical borderland, psychological borderlands, sexual borderlands and spiritual borderlands” (Anzualdua, 1992). The different worlds that merge form a separate entity that is a border culture. The border represents a site and process in which marginalized communities invest. These articulations of the border are part of the shaping nature-society relationships (Lamb, 2014). Mignolo uses Anzualdua’s border as a connector to link similar metaphors. Critical border thinking is considered a method in decolonial shift as it operates as a connector between different experiences of exploitation (Mignolo, 2000). Decolonial thought offers border subjectivity or a knowing that sits in bodies, territories and local histories that has possibilities for gender analysis (Mignolo, 2007; Mignolo & Tlostanova, 2006). Decolonial feminist epistemologies have been drawn from situated knowledges of gender, race, colonialism emerging from borders (Rosalba Icaza, 2018; Rosalba Icaza Rolando Vázquez, 2013). One of these epistemologies “body as territory” acquires significance as a response of Adivasi women against extractivism. This epistemology emerges from the connection between bodies, communities and territory. These new epistemologies of body as territory and indigenous feminism could converge with ecofeminism. A few Adivasi women in the Attappady Hills of Kerala are now delinking from patriarchy and agrarian capitalism. Simultaneously their forest habitats has renewed its green cover after afforestation and new species are being discovered. This study builds on scholarship that finds women are seeking to defend their place by reclaiming their bodies, home, community, and public spaces (Harcourt, W., & Escobar, 2002). Indigenous feminist scholarship highlights the richness of post humanism and indigenous cosmologies that point to the inter relatedness of life forms and

sustaining the earth (L. B. Simpson, 2014; Sundberg, 2014). While indigenous knowledge systems have sustained ecosystems that too is undergoing change. These narratives of enchantment as way of being in the world has the potential to counter colonial practices of commodification and appropriation as such but enchantment functions as technologies of power. Instead decolonial studies needs to move from enchantment to critical enchantment or border thinking (Schulz, 2017).

Coloniality is the other side of modernity with each site of settler colonialism producing its own variations (Mignolo, 2007; Quijano, 2007). Boundaries between indigenous and scientific, local and global, traditional and modern are being mutually constituted in producing regional modernity (Sivaramakrishnan & Agrawal, 2003). Attappady Adivasi women reclaiming importance of community and commons in the midst of switch to cash crops and agribusiness points to particularistic border subjectivity. Border thinking is not unscientific but requires epistemic decolonization of Occidental power towards pluriversal view of more than human ontologies (Mignolo 2011). Commons cannot be islands in a sea of exploitative relations and are rather autonomous spaces from which to challenge the existing organization of life and labour (Federici & Linebaugh, 2018). Such re-enchantment of the commons requires a radical shift in values as capitalism has destroyed environment and livelihoods. This “Earth Democracy” is only possible with values of non-violence, inclusion and reclaiming the commons (Shiva, 2006, 2020). When state and capital interventions have failed and we are in the midst of a pandemic there is epistemic potential in the convergence of decolonial feminist epistemologies of indigenous feminism and ecofeminism mutually enriching and re-enchanting the forest commons. This gendered dialogue of indigenous feminisms with ecofeminisms will add to feminist epistemologies. The place interconnections of the ecologies of nature, society and self or natural, social and psychological with the affective turn will determine social relations of a life in common (Singh, 2018). Colonialism meant the imposition of boundaries - boundaries of territory, identity, nation and state. Decolonisation consisted in the appropriation of these boundaries. The post-colonial is an open field of discursive practices that crosses these boundaries and borders (Ed Pieterse, 1995). This paper is interested in the emergent relational ontology in Attappady.

## **Methodology**

I combined ethnography in Attappady in the Palakkad district with qualitative study of secondary literature that included government reports, forest working plans and media archive since the 60's. The research design was iterative-inductive and while the central motif was agrarian transitions among Adivasi it also gradually incorporated gender and ecology as well as traditional healing frameworks as these aspects emerged relevant from the field context (O'reilly, 2012).

Initially I made a few field visits to Irola villages following high rates of infant mortality and malnutrition in 2013 to understand agrarian distress. I lived in Nellipathy Village in Attappady for seven months January to July. During this time, I also visited interior forest villages of the Kurumbar and the Mudugas. I however, sharpened my focus to three villages Bommyampadi, Chindaki and Kulakoor, in three panchayats of Attappady. Multiple methods were used that included participant observation, semi structured interviews, oral histories, informal discussions. I made key informants early on and many of them were women who introduced me to others in their network. I attended animator meetings, went on field on field visits with health workers and visited community kitchens. I interviewed them on cultivation, traditional healing, development schemes, forest dependence and gender roles. I conducted over a 100 semi structured, in dept interviews and informal discussions. The myths, oral narratives and lived experiences were later coded into themes. Narrative analysis mode was

found apt to interpret these them as it involves place-based lives of minority groups with no written records (George, K., & Stratford, 2016). These Adivasi stories were suitable for narrative analysis also for their “temporal dimensions; focusing on the personal and the social in a balance appropriate to the inquiry; and occurring in sequences of places,” (Clandinin, D. J. and Connelly, 2000). Indigenous researchers it is felt should study their own communities using storytelling and testimonies (Smith, 1999). Increasingly the idea that women should create solidarity based on identity has been replaced with affinity. Affinity being a relation not based on blood, race or gender but by choice (Haraway, 1990). The next section is a discussion on the findings of the study.

## Findings and Discussion

### *Adivasi woman as border zone: A story of land loss*

“In the 60’s my grandfather gave away 4.5 ancestral land for a paltry amount of Rs 100, for a bottle of alcohol and idlis to Sundaram Chetty<sup>8</sup>,” said Remani an Adivasi matriarch. She recalled how Adivasis and settlers entered into land relations and how her people lost land in these transactions. “Balan Chettiar fell in love with the moopan’s<sup>9</sup> daughter and married her and the moopan gave them 4 acres.” “Son of Kaali moopan, Ranga moopan gave away 3 acres to Dorai Chettiar for a radio and a sack of ragi.” Women were the conduit through whom settlers got control over lands in many instances. Settlers entered into various land lease relations with Adivasis and encroached more of their lands. Marathy’s mother gave away 50 cents of land to Thevar settlers in 1982 for Rs 200. The remaining land over 50 cents was also encroached by the Thevars while Marathy has been paying land tax for it. The Thevars built a dwelling on it some years back and are now refusing to vacate. Indigenous woman’s body itself becomes a border zone where there is annihilation of the native woman in the interaction of capital, empire and patriarchy (Anderson, 2011). In India 73.2% of rural women workers are in agricultural activities but only 12.8% of them own land holdings.<sup>10</sup> In Attappady where land records are not maintained women’s land holding is further skewed. Their rooted network across the hills and their land is considered part of the networked body of the Adivasi living world.

Indigenous women were divested of their lands. Settlers sold land they acquired through alliances with Adivasi women and disappeared. Two women healers had settlers claiming their land with false documents. Hema does not have official documents for her forest land though she was paying taxes. A settler was trying to encroach this land with false documents. Sindoori Amma too has her grandfather’s property encroached by a Gounder settler and it is under dispute. While tribal land can no longer be bought by non-tribals it is still leased to them. Encroachment of Adivasi land continues and women headed households are often most vulnerable to such land loss. Historically ecological crisis has made women more vulnerable. In 19<sup>th</sup> century Chotanagpur with disease and famine women’s interest in property came under threat. As a consequence women were targeted as witches (Damodaran, 2002). Adivasi women central to subsistence production have been most hit by the collapse of agriculture and failure in adaptation strategies. The labour produced by women, indigenous people is an embodied materialism that involves caring work and productive energies that are discounted by the dominant economic and social system (Salleh, 2005). Adivasi women’s engagement with their homesteads, kitchen gardens, swidden fields and commons is integral to the household and community life. While memories of land loss is the dominant narrative Adivasis of Attappady

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<sup>8</sup> Names have been changed to protect identity of the people interviewed but some generic names have been used  
<sup>9</sup> “Moopan” is the village headman in Attappady. He is assisted by “mannukaran” the agriculture expert and “Vandari” treasurer.

<sup>10</sup> Raman Shreya, Indiaspend, Sept 9, 2019

have their own myths. At an Adivasi gathering their creation story was recounted of how a boy and a girl of their tribe was saved from the great deluge on the back of a buffalo and made their home in these hills. Indigenous identities and immigrant identities have overlapped and are not separate spheres of analysis, instead communities are defining themselves through their stories (Lessard, Johnson, & Webber, 2011). A resurgence among Attappady's Adivasis requires that their creation stories political structures, languages, stories, songs and ceremonies are also flourishing (L. Simpson, 2011).

### **From bride price to elopement and loss of land**

With the commercialization of agriculture, the demand for land has increased and with it more constraints have been placed on women's access to it. With Adivasi societies becoming more patriarchal there has been a decline in women's position in marital and domestic relations along with property rights. The link between elopement and women's loss of land has been pointed out by Silvia Federica. She built her argument based on a study conducted in Southwest Kenya, showed that by 1980's 80 percent of marriages in that area were by elopement with the consequent creation of "a whole category of landless women." Studies in other parts of Africa have also showed an increase in couples getting married without the payment of bride price which means they were losing their claims to land (Federici & Linebaugh, 2018). In Attappady too there has been a transitioning from bride price to marriage by elopement. Almost every young couple entered into domestic arrangement by elopement.

Kadamma, a 62-year-old Irula woman bemoaned the rise of elopement to her granddaughters as they giggled. These so called "love marriages" are ubiquitous now but in her time the boy had to labor in the fields of the girl's family. Her husband had lived in her parental house for two months before her marriage at 21 years. He had to do plough, get firewood, clear the forest and was judged for his hard work. *"In the old days the boy would have to come and stay in the girl's home. He would have to work for a few days or weeks. Only if his ability to work and behavior was approved would the parents meet. They judged his ability to get along with people without fighting,"* she said.

Adivasi youth study in state run boarding schools in towns and return to their oorus<sup>11</sup> in the midst of forests for their holidays where they meet peers among their kin and fall in love. The main festival of Shivrathri is also a night for young lovers to meet and elope. Most of the couples said they had fallen in love but later revealed that it was marriage by elopement. *"Nyangal Chadipoyada,"* they say of how they began living together. *"My husband and I met when we were at school and we eloped soon after. Only people with money get married,"* said another Adivasi woman. Across Attappady women some with children have moved out of their natal villages and have been abandoned or neglected by their husbands. Men have got into debt sold their lands and these women are usually left with poor quality land and are dependent on the commons. Adivasi women have become feminized and colonized bodies by both settler men and their own men. Laxmi one of the Adivasi women who worked in the field of a Gounder settlerman picking vegetables separated from her husband who was getting suspicious of her fidelity. Many Adivasi women used suspicion or "*shamsyam*" to describe the rift between them and their husbands. The relationship between Adivasis and settlers are exploitative and Adivasi men are infantilized in these encounters. This leads them to alcohol and domestic abuse of their women. Adivasi women as colonized bodies are dominated by settler men and their own men. Many Adivasi women have been abandoned by settlers.

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<sup>11</sup> Oorus are Attappady's Adivasi villages. Attappady Hills are spread over 750 sq km and divided into three administrative areas of Agali, Pudur and Sholayur.

There is a tendency to marry into villages where there is more cash crop cultivation. However, cash crop cultivation has led to debt and men moving out for wage labor leaving more women with no secure means of livelihood. Agrarian capitalism has not eradicated poverty but is continuously recreating it and has led to pauperization (Harriss-White, 2006). Settlers continue to encroach into Adivasi lands which are lying fallow as they don't have the capital to cultivate. Women in the villages are dependent on greens grown near their rivers or vegetables they have grown in the village commons. In this section I have argued that gender inequity has increased through elopement in these societies and this has weakened their access to land and contributed to a disembodied construction of the commons, collective and community (Clement Floriane, Harcourt Wendy, Joshi Deepa, 2019). In the next section I will present my findings of how these women have been affected within the household and community.

### **Breakdown of the domus and Adivasi women's defense of place**

In many of the villages at sundown when families returned from work and gathered around the hearth scuffles broke down. Once a scuffle broke out and men threatened each other with agricultural implements. Adivasis practiced their agriculture in community held lands which has given way to individual privately owned land. Along with changing agrarian transitions and declining agricultural productivity there has been a breakdown of communitarian systems and household has been affected by alcoholism and domestic abuse.

An Adivasi woman said her family had mustard fields as far as the eye could see but after development programs came, her parents started going for wage labor and neglected the fields and no longer have agriculture and have turned alcoholic. *'If an Irula man were to get a job today it invariably means he gets into alcoholism and a more troubled life.'*

Total prohibition on alcohol was enforced in Attappady in 1995. In 1996 there was a ban to brew sell and consume illicit liquor. However, illicit liquor was coming in through the border villages especially at Anaikatty in Tamil Nadu border. There was also illicit brewing of alcohol from spurious material in several *oorus*. In Palakayoor 20 illicit liquor related deaths in 15 years and in Veetiyoor village with 100 residents 15 women were reportedly widowed due to alcoholism.<sup>12</sup>

There was a period of high malnutrition and food insecurity during 2012 and to deal with this the Attappady Comprehensive Tribal Development and Project of the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM) was started in 2013. Prior development programmes in the region were not gender specific or participator (Mariamma J Kalathil, n.d.). The NRLM mission manager tried to elicit the requirements of Adivasi women. The women wanted livelihood generation and savings groups but expressed that none of this had previously worked in the Attappady region as alcoholism was severe among their men wrecking not just their income earning potential but their domestic lives at home and community life in the *oorus*.

With the *oikos* of the Attappady Adivasi woman threatened, even though they had no previous history of organization or leading a social movement they stepped into the *politikon* collapsing the binary of the home and the world. Adivasi women organized a strike against alcohol sale from across the border in Tamil Nadu in 2016. Adivasi women recognized alcoholism as an issue that impeded them from benefitting from any development. Their anti-alcohol struggle that coalesced around bodies, *domus* and communities has been a distinctly place based political activity (Harcourt, Wendy; Escobar, 2002). Even though it was the first time many of them were part of a strike they entered into the public sphere with non-violent protest involving hunger strike, road block, processions and a day-long hartal or stalling traffic

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<sup>12</sup> M Suchitra, Sinking in Illicit Liquor, Down To Earth, July 4, 2015

and shutting down shops around the issue of alcoholism. “*Thaikulam Sangam*” or the Mothers Collective of Adivasi women of Attappady have been at the forefront of the protest against sale of alcohol and brewing of illicit alcohol. The women still speak of this strike as a turning point in their political consciousness. They encountered police, resisted arrest and made their demands. This was the first time they stepped out of the oikion to the politicon. The states goal is to strengthen women collectives for regenerating agriculture for food security, economic sustainability and self-reliance. The next section explores how gender-agriculture pathways have been affected.

### **Rupture of gender-agriculture-foodways**

“*We cultivated millets on hillsides as far as the eye could see. People worked in each other fields and were compensated by grain. We stored the grain in pits in the ground and seeds in sacks.*” “*We cultivated two crops our generation worked hard on the fields and lived,*” said one of the older women. They grew little millet and finger millet besides various lentils and consumed a variety of greens or “*daag*.” Apart from their swidden Adivasis worked in the fields of the landlords. One of the women from Bommyampadi remembers that as a young girl she chased away birds from the paddy fields of the landlord and was payed in coins. Women are central to foodways and nutritional sufficiency. Women are recognized as majority of the subsistence farmers. Their dependence on diverse web of resources in the forests transformed into settled cultivation of cash crops all too suddenly. In the process subsistence agriculture has been wiped out and cash crop cultivation has left most of them in debt. With the settlers coming in there has been a shift from food crops to non-food crops and also an increasing dependence on the state for grain this has severely affected their ecological knowledge and everyday cultural practices. There is now a higher value on rice-based foods with the dietary culture and agricultural practices created by settlers. The public distribution system supplies rice and ensures food security but their traditional millets are not available. This has been mixed for women while they are relieved to do away with the drudgery of processing, stocking and preparing they just have to purchase rice and cook it but their nutritional intake has gone down and their ecological everyday knowledges have disappeared. Rural commons are central to the livelihoods of poor households in dry regions and constitute over 40 per cent of their sustenance during drought years.

The latest FAO report points out that income inequality increases the likelihood of severe food insecurity. Food insecurity (moderate and severe) points to a gender gap. In every continent, the prevalence of food insecurity is slightly higher among women than men. Reducing gender inequalities and social exclusion of population groups is means to improved food security and nutrition (FAO, 2019). As the Irulas have mostly stopped swidden they have been going to the fields of the settlers for daily wage labor and the men are paid more than women. But there has been an increasing feminization of labor and Adivasi women cultivate their forest patches, some banana and vegetables. Households and whole communities are dependent on women, in a feminization of survival (Sasken, 2000).

Some Adivasi women support the household with a wide range of activities. 60-year-old woman in Palayur depends on wage labor and her husband’s income from a small shop. She also cultivates some banana and grows vegetables on their 2.5 acres for their household nutritional needs. “*We are doing mixed crops. When we plant ragi we are planting spinach, mustard and vegetables. Some of us doing banana cultivation imitating settlers,*” she said. Agricultural collapse hits Adivasi women and their foodways most. Agriculture itself has had too many setbacks and has practically come to standstill in most of these villages. Tracks of rolling hillsides were vacant in Sholayur as wild animal menace increased and Adivasis have stopped cultivating for over 10 years and turned to wage labor.

Even though there has been a feminization of agriculture and many of the women were field hands agriculture has almost ground to a halt. While men go out of their villages and get work seasonally women are unable to support themselves anymore. Some of the older women, anemic women and mothers were being held afloat only by the basic grain through PDS.

Women have a key role to play in increasing agricultural productivity and production. Adivasi women in Attappady are custodians of this socio ecological intelligence in their practice of seed preservation, knowledge of biota, songs and chants that can heal their children and kin of diseases. The NRLM project has trained Adivasi women into quasi development actors with a focus to ensure food security, sense of community and ensure earth care.

In family farms women played key role during planting seeds, harvesting and allied farm activities. Adivasi women intercrop vegetables with millets, keep watch over crops and harvest. Family farms however have a clash of family and work, production and reproduction which leads to women's roles in agriculture being undermined (Hélène Guétat-Bernard, 2014). Even as they are being dispossessed of their foodways and agriculture, there are pockets in which their traditional millets and medicinal use of plants is being preserved. This is what is increasingly called land-based pedagogy (L. B. Simpson, 2014).

While marginal Adivasi women farmers have been most affected by agrarian crisis the resurgence of their foodways is also being initiated by them. The community kitchens lead by women are the most vibrant symbol of reclaiming their food cultures. The kitchens provide nutritious foods that are sourced, cooked and run by women. It includes their traditional foods made of millets and greens and it is also a space where the village gathers around the hearth and socialise. The community kitchens are likely to turn into nutritional resource centres to help preserve their traditional plant-based foods. This is an attempt to renew local foodways and resist dominance of over some of their practices. Adivasi women were being trained by NRLM in 2017 to connect the micro to the macro from individual and community health to the health of the soil, water and ecosystem. This points to the epistemic potential for a discourse between ecofeminism and decolonial feminist epistemology of body-territory. These islands of eco swaraj or radical ecological democracy being envisioned by these NRLM women leaders and Adivasi women steer away dystopic futures and point to the pluriversal imagination that has been ignited in this region (Kothari, A., Salleh, A., Escobar, A., Demaria, F., & Acosta, 2019).

The “*ooruadappu*” a hearth for cooking and sharing food has been reinstated as community kitchen. Adivasi women are running these community kitchens. This an example of indigenous food sovereignty with potential for decolonization (Grey & Patel, 2015). It is the earliest sign of the beginning of a new food system in Attappady where large scale agrarian distress is the everyday reality. Neglected traditional foodways, offer hope in a situation where most households are living on state subsidized rice, wage labour and little local agricultural production. Women focused farmers field schools was initiated where Adivasi women are given training in a long-term restoration of agro-ecosystems, indigenous collective farming (S Shanthi, 2017). In an NRLM report multifunctional land use is recommended for the wellbeing of people, community and these forests. Land use planning suggests one fourth of the land should be conserved for land and ecosystem regeneration, one fourth for food, one fourth for market and one fourth for perennial crops, fruiting trees, trees for wood and fodder (S Shanthi, 2017).

### **In Media Res: Flows of enchantment, critical enchantment and re-enchantment**

I started off this paper with the indigenous feminist who wants to connect her history with the future and the Kurumba girl who studies science, thinking aloud: “*If we are not called Valli, then what will we be as a people?*” She is a young woman in between Non-Western

relational knowledge of her people and the science that she hopes will prepare her for the future. In this dialogue between knowledge systems she draws on her indigenous feminine identity as *Valli*. This border subjectivity of indigenous and gender identities in Attappady Hills then becomes imbued with possibilities for alternative paradigms in the interstices of transdisciplinary science with society. Signs of ecological resurgence of these forests and Adivasi women reviving foodways and cultivation bring out the in-media res entanglements of nature and society.

Gender is a crucial variable in a multiscale understanding of the boundary between the home and the world, local and global, human and non-human. This empirical study finds that Adivasi women's bodies themselves become a border zone through which settler men conquer territory. Increase in elopement has contributed to land dispossession among women and domestic disharmony. The connection between gender agriculture and foodways in Attappady has been disrupted by extractivist capital intensive agriculture. Adivasi women have collapsed the binary between the home and the world by stepping from the oikion to the politikon. They are delinking from patriarchy, regional colonialism and agrarian capitalism. Their revival of millet cultivation and foodways through community kitchens is a decolonial intervention. Their forest habitats have regenerated and interventions of the women make them allies with the forests. Narratives of enchantment have however, been replaced by critical enchantment but this work extends the argument to include visions of re-enchantment of the commons. This analysis provides some policy lessons to ensure Adivasi women have decision making roles in kudumbashree and local governance bodies.

The convergences of decolonial feminist epistemologies of body territory and indigenous feminisms with ecofeminism, create multiple gender and ecology politics. By bringing together decolonial frameworks of geo politics, body territory and indigenous feminisms with ecofeminism this work contributes to enlarging perspectives in feminist epistemology. It also adds to growing work in feminist geography in which affect, place, and relational ways of being in the world add to discussions. The shifting imaginary from decolonization to post-colonial is marked by departure from borders to border crossings (Ed Pieterse, 1995). In a post capitalist, postcolonial world flows of knowledge are in media res between enchantment, critical enchantment and re-enchantment. The new "Valli" emerging in the Attappady Hills is at the cusp of such crossings.

### **Acknowledgements**

This work was supported by Research Assistance at Indian Institute of Technology Madras. Thank you to my faculty supporter Swarnalatha Rangarajan and faculty advisor Sudhir Chella Rajan. The author wishes to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments as well the editors of this special issue. I am thankful to Astrida Neimanis and Christiane Bailey editors of *PhaenEx* special issue "*Becoming Ecofeminisms*" for comments on an early draft. I am grateful to the POLLEN Network and Professor Simon Batterbury for comments.

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