Articulating Identities in the Struggle for Land: The Case of the Indigenous People (*Adivasis*) of Highland Kerala, South India

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This paper discusses the initial articulation and the later re-articulation of *adivasi* identities in their struggles for re-claiming land rights. *Adivasis* – meaning original inhabitants - are the indigenous communities that have beening living in the forested highlands of Kerala since time immemorial. Colonial anthropologists and administrators chose to describe these communities as tribes in the process of 'othering' them and the post-colonial state created a 'Scheduled Tribe' slot to include them in the Constitution for affirmative action purpose. Their collective subjectivity as indigenous peoples is, however, articulated in terms of *adivasi*. Their identity as *adivasi* and hence their attachment to place had been projected in their struggles for re-claiming rights in land and forests. The *adivasis* are a highly heterogeneous group with differential relation to land and forests. The Law passed by the government of Kerala to restitute the land claims of *adivasis* treated the indigenous peoples as a monolith, which had grave consequences for the land claims of the majority of the *adivasi* population. The subsequent struggles were marked by a re-articulation of the sub-identities, that is, specific identities of each *adivasi* group linked to specific historicities connecting them to particular places within the landscape. Using Stuart Hall's (Hall 1996) conception of identity as an articulated positioning, the paper attempts to analyse the dynamic articulation of indigenous people's identities in the process of their protracted struggle for land.

Introduction

This paper discusses the initial articulation and the later re-articulation of indigenous people's identities in the struggles for re-claiming their ancestral lands in highland Kerala.[1] The strategies of the settlers to thwart the restitution of land to the *adivasis* led to a protracted, contested and unfinished implementation.[2] It has also created a dilemma for the state, resulting in a series of changes in legislation. While the conservative coalition governments led by the Congress party have consistently adopted a settler-friendly approach, the Left coalition governments led by the Communist party of

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[1] The indigenous people of India are officially referred to as 'scheduled tribes'. They identify themselves are *adivasis* meaning first inhabitants.

[2] The settlers are the farmers that migrated from the midlands and highlands of Kerala from the 1930s to the early 1980s.

India (Marxist) – CPI (M) – held an ambivalent stand for a long period. However, in 1999 the Left government passed an Act that succeeded to a great extent in taking into consideration the intersecting nature of class and indigeneity. The Act also coincided with a rearticulation of *adivasi* sub-identities as particular communities such as *Kurumar*, *Paniyar*, *Kattunaicker* and so on.

Stuart Hall's conceptualization of identity as an 'articulated positioning' is useful in gaining a theoretical understanding of the *adivasi* land struggles. The term articulation, as defined by Hall, has a dual meaning: articulation as the process of making a collective identity, position, or set of interests explicit and comprehensible to an audience; and to the process of linking that position towards achieving definite political ends (Hall 1990, 1996; Li 2000). '… [A] theory of articulation is both a way of understanding how ideological elements come, under certain conditions, to cohere together within a discourse, and a way of asking how they do or do not become articulated, at specific conjunctures, to certain political subjects' (Hall 1996: 141-142). Hall argues that collective identities can be forged to work towards a political end, and then re-articulated in a different conjuncture. Identities are thus '…unstable points of identification or suture… Not an essence but a *positioning*' (Hall 1990: 226). Articulations are therefore open to re-articulation, as the closure of one positioning is merely arbitrary and contingent (Li 2000). The initial positioning of the indigenous people as a monolithic category – the *adivasis* – can be interpreted as an articulation aimed at projecting a collective identity that would enable them to renegotiate their relations with the state, the settlers, and the larger Kerala society in an attempt to reclaim alienated lands. The realization that government legislation to restore land claims would benefit only certain *adivasi* communities has prompted them to engage in a re-articulation of their sub-identities or micro-identities by positioning themselves in subsequent struggles as particular communities – as *Kurumar, Paniyar, Kattunaicker* and so on. This has been achieved by highlighting their differential historicities and attachment to place. Such a re-articulation has drawn a favourable response from the state as reflected in the agreement between the government and the *adivasis* in 2001. I shall argue, however, that the *adivasi* movement might not consider a closure of the indigenous people's positioning as *adivasis* and their sub-identities as particular *adivasi* communities, but might further strive towards re-articulating class into the *adivasi* identity, as class and indigeneity are not necessarily dividing/opposing categories but might overlap and intersect to constitute multiple sources of oppression.

The *adivasis* are heterogeneous communities that have had historically different relations to land and forests (Kjosavik and Shanmugaratnam, forthcoming a). Therefore, attempts to address their land question need to understand this fact and take it into consideration. To facilitate such an understanding, this study explores three *adivasi* communities that have had historically different relations with land and forests: the *Kurumar* – traditional agriculturists; the *Paniyar* – agrestic slaves/bonded labourers (from around the 15th century to mid-20th century) and the *Kattunaicker* –

traditionally hunters and gatherers.[3] The highland district of Wayanad in northern Kerala was selected for this study. Wayanad has the highest percentage of indigenous population in Kerala – 15 per cent of the total district population and 35 per cent of the total *adivasi* population of Kerala (State Resource Centre 2002). Indigenous people (*adivasis)* constitute 1.01 per cent of Kerala's population.[4] This region was under British rule from 1805 to 1947. The incidence of land alienation is the highest in this district (Mohandas 1992) and it is the major site of the ongoing struggles for land. Irulam village, where the three communities co-exist, was selected for a detailed field study. I have relied heavily on in-depth interviews and group discussions for primary data. Secondary data sources have also been used. The data collection involved several field visits, from August 1998 to December 2003, as part of a larger study on indigenous people of Kerala.

The following sections provide accounts of articulating and re-articulating *adivasi* identities and land claims through particular modes of engagement with the state, and focuses on the *adivasi* land struggles drawing on the articulation of their identities, the more recent struggles in which land claims are reframed through a re-articulation, and their attempt to project a new politics for an imagined future.

Articulating Adivasi Identities

A people's self-identification as indigenous could be considered as 'a *positioning* which draws upon historically sedimented practices, landscapes, and repertoires of meaning, and emerges through particular patterns of engagement and struggle' (Li 2000: 151). An analysis of the *adivasi* land struggles reveals that their identities were constituted by and constitutive of the struggles in which they have been engaged. In other words, the *adivasi* identity is more about becoming than being.

It could be posited that the ideology implicated in the *adivasi* identity was articulated into the *adivasi* movement in the process of the struggles. In Stuart Hall's view, it is through articulation that ideologies get connected to social groups, thus creating political subjects and transform them into a social force (Hall 1996). Hall develops his idea from the theory of articulation developed by Laclau (1977), whose position is that an ideology, though it transforms people's consciousness and awareness of themselves and their historical situation, does not by itself constitute a social or political force. It can, however, become articulated to a social movement so as to recruit sectors of the population who have not been hitherto part of the movement. A movement, by constituting itself as a collective subject within the framework of a common ideology, becomes a social force. It becomes a unified social force, for instance as a class or cross-class movement, only when it acquires some form of intelligibility that explains a shared collective situation. It is in this moment that a variety of social forces get articulated to that particular ideology. A variety of social groups may enter into and

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[3] The term agrestic slaves is used to refer to slaves attached to land.
[4] In 2001 Kerala had a population of 31.8 million.

constitute themselves as a social or political force, albeit for a time, partly by 'seeing themselves reflected as a unified force in the ideology which constitutes them' (Hall 1996: 144). Ideology and social forces thus operate in a dialectical relationship. From a Marxian perspective, 'the poor', for instance, by themselves constitute a group; but they do not constitute a political force *because* they are poor; they become a political or historical force only when they are constituted as new political subjects through an ideology that makes sense of them. As Hall argues:

> So it is articulation, the non-necessary link, between a social force which is making itself, and the ideology or conceptions of the world which makes intelligible the process they are going through, which begins to bring on to the historical stage a new social position and historical position, a new set of social and political subjects. (Hall 1996: 144).

Hall insists that the significance of an 'organic ideology' as a social and political force hinges upon the social groups that can be articulated to and by it. The principle of articulation, therefore, must be located here. The connection, however, is not one '*necessarily* given in socio-economic structures or positions, but precisely as the result of *an articulation*' (Hall 1996: 145, italics in original). Therefore, it may be argued that the articulated ideologies provide the necessary substratum for a social group to tease out the subjective meanings of their objective realities, thus constructing identities, which dialectically reinforce ideologies and political action. The development of *adivasi* consciousness and the transformation of the *adivasis* into a social force could be understood along these lines.

The word '*adivasi*', commonly used in all the Indian languages, originates from Sanskrit; *adi* meaning 'beginning' or 'earlier times' and *vasi* meaning 'resident of'. It is similar to the word 'aborigine' or 'indigenous', meaning 'existed from the beginning' in a territory, landscape or geographical formation. The word *adivasi* was first articulated by political activists in Chotanagpur, Central India (Bates 1995), in the livelihood struggles of the indigenous communities against the colonial state and its colluders. The *adivasi* ideology, which was articulated into the 'tribal movement', helped make sense of the historical marginalization process and its linkages to the existing socio-economic reality of the *adivasis*, thereby constituting them as new political subjects. The articulation of this term by the *adivasis* and activists was undoubtedly a political tactic to forge connections and solidarities among the colonial designates, the 'tribals' inhabiting the fragmented landscape – in geographic and socio-economic terms – that was India. The subsequent struggles of the indigenous peoples in the colonial and post-colonial periods were orchestrated around their identity articulated as *adivasis*. In a similar vein, the concept of 'indigenous peoples' was first articulated in the 1970s by the North American Indians in their struggle for self-reliance, and access and control over land and other natural resources (Gray 1997; Tauli-Corpuz 1997).

In India, colonialism had excluded the indigenous people by constructing a 'tribal' other, while the post-colonial state created a 'scheduled tribe' slot in an attempt to integrate them into the mainstream. In Wayanad, the struggle for land rights has been a simultaneous process of articulation of *adivasi* identities as well. The organic process of shifting strategies in their struggle was also linked to their tactical positioning as *adivasis* and/or particular *adivasi* communities. In their initial struggles, the pre-constituted heterogeneous and hierarchical formations found a common ideological platform, namely, their identity as indigenous peoples – the *adivasis*. Hierarchies and the politics of difference were strategically played down in a process of articulation that was initially facilitated by non-*adivasi* activists. The image of the *adivasis* as a monolithic entity was projected to the audience – the state and the hegemonic social groups. This was a tactical move to impress upon the audience their (*adivasis'*) imminent power as political subjects and as a social force. 'Original inhabitant' was the lynchpin around which their identities were then articulated. The founding of *Adivasi Aikya Samithi* (The United *Adivasi* Forum), a forum of various indigenous groups at the local level, which coalesced at the regional level to form the *Adivasi Vikasana Pravarthaka Samithi* (The *Adivasi* Development Activists' Forum), was the result of these articulations. It paved the way for the emergence of a critical mass of leadership among the indigenous peoples by the late 1980s. Their positioning as *adivasi* and the rights inherent in that identity supplied the initial impetus for the struggles for land.[5]

The *adivasi* movement gained an added impetus from the developments related to the rights of indigenous peoples in the late 1980s and early 1990s in the international arena. Various developments – the ILO Convention No. 169, 1989; the World Bank's Operational Directive No. 4.20, 1991; the UNWGIP (United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Peoples) Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, 1993; the declaration of 1993 as the International Year of the Indigenous Peoples, and 1995–2004 as the UN Decade of the Indigenous Peoples – all provided wider legitimacy to the *adivasi* struggles for land and livelihoods. The international movement of indigenous peoples provided a discursive momentum for Kerala's *adivasi* movement. For instance, Kerala's *adivasi* movement drew upon the discourses of the international indigenous peoples' rights movement to confront the state government, the national government and the judiciary. Idioms and adages employed in distant geographies were co-opted and rephrased in the articulation of *adivasi* identities and their struggles for land. The networking of the *adivasis* with other regions, a weeklong meeting (*Sangamom*) of the *adivasis* of South India in Wayanad in 1992, followed by the formation of the *Adivasi* South Zone Forum, served to forge and reinforce their monolithic identity as *adivasis*. Micro-identities were subsumed under the *adivasi* umbrella. This, I would argue, was a tactical positioning adopted by the indigenous movement to swing the conjunctural imperatives of the indigenous politics in the international and national arenas to their advantage. The conjunctures at which some communities

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[5] In the struggles for transformation, Marx makes a distinction between the material realm that is, the conditions of production, and the ideological realm in which humans become conscious of the inherent conflicts (Marx 1986).

position themselves as indigenous are the products of agency and the cultural and political work of articulation. This positioning enables them to renegotiate the ways in which they connect to the nation state, the government, and their own place (Li 2000).

The Politics of Place and Adivasi Identity

The Wayanad landscape is being reinterpreted and recreated in the process of articulating *adivasi* identities in the ongoing land struggles. Moore (1998) argues that localities should rather be conceived as products of contestations than as inert, fixed backdrops for identity struggles: '…we make our space/spatialities in the process of our identities' (Massey 1995: 285). The cultural politics of place, 'the historically sedimented practices that weave contested meanings into the fabric of the locality' (Moore 1998: 347) is conjoined with the politics of identity (Jacobs 1994; Radhakrishnan 1996; Watts 1991). In Wayanad, the *adivasi* movement's refusal to accept alternate lands,[6] and the insistence on having land in their own localities[7] and their spatially situated livelihood practices, all constitute a concrete politics of place. Spatially situated livelihood practices are woven into popular understandings of the relation between locality and identity (Pred 1986). Gupta and Ferguson (1992) argue that attaching causes to places is important for successful political mobilization. In articulating attachment to place into the *adivasi* identity, they were tacking their cause – land rights to the place Wayanad. A people's attachment to a place, invoking a 'sense of place' (Agnew 1989), is also constitutive of their identity, through history lived in person or experienced in social memories. Therefore, the *adivasi* struggles for place would be simultaneously symbolic – over meanings, and material - over land and livelihoods. Thus the Wayanad landscape can be viewed as a materially and symbolically contested terrain.

The 1999 Act opened an opportunity for the *adivasis* to re-articulate their identities. The *adivasis* of Wayanad, while hailing the spirit of the Act that provides for alternate land to those who have had their lands alienated, and lands to all landless *adivasis*, were concerned about the implementation aspects, and with good reason.[8] They feared that the government would find lands for them in far away 'alien' places, where they would be 'out of place'. The *Kurumar* therefore rejected the Act and its provision for alternate lands.[9] They began to re-articulate their *adivasi* identity by invoking their attachment to place. Their contention was that it was their right to have the lands restored as they had a historical attachment to the place, in a way the settlers could not claim. They declared that the government could give alternate land to the settlers and their own lands should be

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[6] For those who were included in the 1975 Act – mostly *Kurumar* and *Kurichiyar*.
[7] In the case of the landless communities – mostly *Paniyar*, *Kattunaicker*, *Adiyar* and *Uralis* overlooked by the 1975 Act but included in the 1999 Act.
[8] Discussions with *adivasi* activists and NGOs.
[9] This was the collective stand of the *adivasi* movement. Individual *Kurumar* I had discussions with told me that they were willing to take alternative lands if they were somewhere near their locality.

restituted. The argument was that the settlers' livelihoods could be reproduced elsewhere unlike the indigenous people's livelihoods that were place-situated. As a young *Kuruman* activist put it: 'If they [the settlers] could leave everything from their native place and live here, it is possible for them to go and live in another place where the government would give them land. It is impossible for us to leave this place'. Another *Kuruman* who was listening rejoined: 'If you ask a settler where his *nadu* (native place) is, the answer is Pala, Kottayam, Muvattupuzha, Thodupuzha or some other place, never Wayanad.'[10] For him this was an indication of the settlers' lack of attachment to Wayanad. The *adivasis* thus invoke the 'unity of people and place' (Li 2000: 168). The *Kurumar* invoked historical narratives to establish their anteriority in the region, such as recounting how their king (the Veda king) was defeated by treachery and their territory was conquered by the neighbouring Kurumbranad and Kottayam kings.[11] We have lived in this place from time immemorial. We believe we are the ones who have the right to live here. We were here before the settlers, we were here before the British, we were here before the Nairs and the Nambiars (An elderly *Kuruman*). Cohen (1993) argues that only indigenous peoples can claim that their culture, identity and existence are inextricably tied up in the unique space occupied by them.

Landscapes can be explored as 'symbolic fields', as 'maps of meaning', as 'ways of seeing'; indeed, read as texts, all of which rests on the assumption that social groups actively produce meanings but do so in ways that can 'pinch out emancipatory impulses' (Thrift 1989: 151, quoted in Watts 1992: 122). In the process of the *adivasis'* emancipatory struggles*, a mapping of Wayanad landscape as imbued with spiritual meanings is recognizable. The *adivasis* of Wayanad, whether *Kurumar* or *Paniyar* or *Kattunaicker*, consider their dead ancestors to be gods. The landscape is marked by the presence of their ancestors who are buried in special burial grounds. Rituals have to be performed for the ancestors on certain days of the year. The life-cycle rituals and ceremonies need the ancestors' presence and blessing. Propitiation of ancestral spirits who watch over their lands is necessary at every stage of their farming activities – sowing, intermediate stage and harvest stage – to get a good crop. Thus ancestors are imbricated in their everyday life:

> This is our ancestral land. If we go away from here how can we perform our rituals and ceremonies? How can we please our ancestors and ask for their guidance? Our existence will be in danger if we go away from this place. (*Kattunaicken* Chief)

Problems of death and burial were also invoked by the Chief: 'We do not want to die in 'alien' lands. We do not want to be buried with strangers. Our spirits will not have peace. We have to join our ancestors after death. Now do you understand why we do not want to go away?'

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[10] These were the main regions in Kerala from where largescale outmigration to Wayanad occurred.
[11] See Kjosavik and Shanmugaratnam (forthcoming a) for a historical perspective on the region.

For the *Paniyar* too, the ceremonies after death are inextricably interlinked with place. They invoke the necessity of maintaining their social organization as a prerequisite for performing death ceremonies and propitiating ancestors. They need the services of an *attali* (a specially trained person) to perform the ritual of *penappattu*, a continuous recital of the story of the *Paniyar* community from the 'beginning'. This ceremony is essential for pleasing the spirit of the dead person before burial and for three years after the burial. There are very few *attalis* in the community, and the *Paniyar* express fears that they may be buried without *penappattu* if they go away to distant places. The *adivasi*'s struggle for land thus assumes a spiritual meaning linked to their identity and attachment to place: '…the place is inseparable from the consciousness of those who inhabit it' (Daniels 1985: 151). The espousing of the spiritual connectedness of the *adivasis* to the Wayanad landscape at this moment of struggle could be understood as a political strategy to reinforce the legitimacy of their claims for land in that region.

In the *adivasi* social memories, the Wayanad landscape is inscribed with political meanings. Their representations of past political sufferings and struggles for the sake of Wayanad are inextricably braided with their present struggles and future aspirations. They invoke their ancestors' role in the Pazhassi *Yudham*, the war of Pazhassi Rajah against the British conquest of Wayanad. In the protracted war that lasted for more than a decade (1792–1805), the *adivasis* fought side by side with the Pazhassi Rajah using bows and arrows, worked as secret intelligence agents and messengers, provided food and other services to the army, and protected the Rajah by hiding him in secret places known only to *adivasis* by virtue of their familiarity with the landscape. Thousands of *adivasis* sacrificed their lives for their homeland. In 1805, the Rajah was killed and Wayanad came under British rule. Many *adivasis* fled to the forest interiors, fearing British reprisals. These sufferings of their ancestors are recorded in Wayanad history and inscribed in the *adivasi* social memories, which they invoke to legitimate their land claims in Wayanad. They remember that it was their ancestors who rose up against the British in 1812 to protest against the extraction of high land revenue, while the upper castes – the Nairs and Nambiars – colluded with the British: 'Our ancestors were the ones who shed blood for the Wayanadan soil' (A *Kuruman* activist). Some of the *adivasis* invoke their more recent lived memories associated with the 'naxalite' uprising in Wayanad, and the suffering for land.[12] Hence they are not 'a-historic' peoples (cf. Marx 1853); they have made history – a history invoked in their struggle for land. Cosgrove and Daniels (1988) argue that a dialectical relationship is often discernible between political economy and forms of representation of landscapes.

The *adivasis*' historical relationship to the Wayanad landscape has not been uniform in nature: they have had historically different relationships with land and forests leading to the 'coexistence of multiple historicities within any particular locality' (Feierman 1990: 29). The 1999 Act passed by the

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[12] This was an uprising organised by the radical Left party CPI (ML) - Communist Party of India (Marxist Leninist) - in the 1960s. Their first uprising was in a place called Naxalbari in North-East India and hence the name 'Naxalite'.

Left government presented an opportunity for the historically landless *adivasis* of Wayanad – the *Paniyar*, *Kattunaicker*, *Adiyar* and *Uralis* – to re-articulate their particular identities as *Paniyar*, *Kattunaicker*, *Adiyar* or *Urali* that were hitherto subsumed under the pan-*adivasi* identity. The spatially situated livelihood practices stemming from their particular histories were invoked in their insistence on land in the same locality. For instance, the *Paniyar* were historically agrestic slaves/bonded labourers of landlords and were mostly working in rice fields. A large part of their subsistence needs were obtained by gathering resources from the forest – wood for fuel, roots and tubers, fruits and vegetables. The Wayanad landscape offers rice fields and forests in their vicinity. The Kattunaicker were traditionally hunters and gatherers. Collection of minor forest produce from the forests is still a major activity among this community, apart from dependence on forests for food and fuelwood. These communities remember that a large proportion of the Vested forestlands of Wayanad were earmarked for distribution to them in the 1970s considering their specific historical experience. Thus in order to stake their land claims they began to articulate their sub-*adivasi* identity as *Paniyar* or *Kattunaicker*, as distinct from that of the *Kurumar* whose struggles hitherto had largely been orchestrated around the 1975 Act for restitution. Micro-identities, however, were articulated within the framework of the larger *adivasi* identity and these struggles were tactically interlinked.

While the 1999 Act was contested in the Courts, the Left government proceeded with an assessment of the lands available to be distributed to the *adivasis*.[13] In the May 2001 elections, however, the Congress coalition was elected to power. The *adivasis* were losing patience – a patience that had lasted for more than two decades. Reports of the deaths from starvation of 32 *adivasis* in mid-July 2001 triggered them into action. A group of radical *adivasi* women and men enacted a Robin Hood in Wayanad: they captured a mobile food shop belonging to the Civil Supplies Corporation and distributed the food to the *adivasis*. Subsequently, they engaged in a 48-day-long intensive agitation at the State Secretariat in the capital, Trivandrum, from 30 August to 16 October 2001. Multiple modes of agitation, including building huts on the premises of the Secretariat, *sathyagraham*,[14] relay fasting, indefinite hunger strikes, demonstrations, mass rallies and so on were adopted to engage the government, the public and the media. The struggle was organized by the *Adivasi Dalith Samara Samithi*, a conglomeration of *adivasi* and *dalith* organizations.[15] This struggle was groundbreaking in that it was the first time the rights to land of the historically landless *adivasi* groups such as the *Paniyar*, the *Kattunaicker*, the *Adiyar* and so on who constitute the largest section of the *adivasi* population, were projected as the major demand.[16] The slogan of the 2001 struggle was 'land to the landless *adivasis*'.

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[13] Discussion with village officer, Irulam.
[14] Sit-in strikes in front of the Secretariat.
[15] The struggle was led by C.K Janu, an *adivasi* woman and M. Geethanandan, a *dalith* man. *Daliths* are the oppressed castes.
[16] See also Ravi Raman (2002).

The new struggle for land rights was layered onto the local cultural politics, the politics of place and the multiple identities of *adivasis* enmeshed in and re-articulated through these politics. A major breakthrough of the struggle was the demand for a settlement outside the ambit of the 1975 Act. This was made possible by the successful re-articulation of the simultaneity of the indigenous identities – their identity as *adivasis* as well as sub-identity (micro-identity) as *Paniyar*, *Kattunaicker*, *Adiyar* and so on. The multiple historicities of the Wayanad *adivasis* were articulated into the struggles in an attempt to break out of the two-and-a-half-decade-long impasse surrounding the 1975 Act that ascribed a single history to the *adivasis*. The mobilization that ensued was unprecedented in its scale. It would seem that the re-articulation invoking cultural politics and the politics of place was forceful enough that the Congress government agreed to grant between one and five acres of land to all the *adivasi* families that were landless and to those who had less than one acre of land, in their own localities depending on the availability. The process was to be completed between 1 January and 31 December 2002. The government also agreed to prepare a proposal that would include the *adivasi* regions of Kerala in Schedule 5 of Article 244 of the Indian Constitution and send it to the Government of India for notification by the President.[17] Inclusion in Schedule 5 would provide special rights and privileges to the region, including *adivasi* self-rule at the sub-national level through the implementation of the Provisions of the Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Bill.

The re-articulations reflected in the 2001 struggle sedimented into a powerful agency of the *adivasis*. This made it possible for them to negotiate a settlement outside the 1975 Act, against the advice of some of the non-*adivasi* supporters of the struggle, including CPI (ML- Red Flag) and the BJP (Bharathiya Janatha Party). This was a tactical and well-considered move by the *adivasis* insofar as the practicalities were concerned, and in consideration of the limitations of the 1975 Act and the protracted stalemate in its implementation. The government, however, agreed to abide by the decision of the Supreme Court as regards the 1975 Act. The *Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha* (AGMS), a Grand Assembly of the various *adivasi* communities with 380 representatives from 31 different *adivasi* communities of Kerala, grew out of this struggle. It also serves as a platform for all *adivasi* organizations in Kerala.

Re-imagining Land Rights: Continuing Struggles

A special administrative unit was constituted by the government, which included a Tribal Mission, a Cabinet Committee and several other committees for speedy implementation of the 2001 agreement. The Tribal Mission identified 36,012 acres of land to be distributed and on 1 January 2002 titles for 370 acres were distributed (Sivanandan and Madhava Menon 2003). The Mission actively engaged in finding lands and dealing with procedures for obtaining the Central Government's permission to

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[17] See Bijoy and Ravi Raman (2003) for details of the agreement.

distribute vested forestlands to the *adivasis*. The Master Plan Committee proposed the constitution of *Gothra Sabha* (*Adivasi* Assembly), *Oorukkoottangal* (village assemblies), and formalizing this administrative arrangement in the *adivasi* zones, the formation of a sort of autonomous *adivasi* republic (Sivanandan 2003). However, the government, without giving any explanation, halted all these processes and reduced the Tribal Mission to the status of an advisory body, and redeployed all the employees who were actively engaged in the work. The Principal Secretary, who was responsible for the implementation of the Master Plan, was replaced by the Forest Secretary, who was antagonistic to the proposals in the Plan. The Master Plan Committee was thus sabotaged by the government, and the Draft Plan was suspended (Sivanandan 2003).

The *adivasi* activists I had discussions with told me that the whole process was sabotaged by vested non-*adivasi* interests, including the Forest Department, the Forest Development Corporation (which controlled many of the plantations that were earmarked to be distributed to *adivasis*), the Agriculture Department, which had some farms under its control, the non-*adivasi* managements, and the trade unions of other *adivasi* project areas under consideration for distribution. Even the state departments that controlled these project areas were against the distribution of the plantations. Here the presumption that the state is a monolithic entity with unified interests crumbles; instead it was revealed to be an internally differentiated entity, itself a site of contestations so much so that 'the state is no longer to be taken as essentially an actor, with the coherence, agency, and subjectivity that term presumes' (Mitchell 1991: 90). The state could rather be 'opened as a theatre in which resources, property rights and authority are struggled over' (Watts 1989: 4). In the present context, the state, represented by various administrative departments, state corporations, the bureaucracy, and so on, is clearly a differentiated entity contesting for power and control over distribution of property rights. While the Chief Minister,[18] certain Departments, and some bureaucrats were in favor of distribution of certain state lands to the *adivasis*, others were strongly opposed to it, since their interests were dominated by partisan politics, bureaucratic rents and power, and, in some cases, with protecting the class interests of workers who were mostly non-*adivasis*. This situation reveals the dialectical nature of the class - *adivasi* politics as well; a clear mismatch emerges between the interests of non-*adivasi* workers and *adivasi* workers. The opposing forces within the state gained an upper hand, thereby sabotaging the land distribution process and the implementation of the 2001 Agreement.

Consequent to this the Left began to play a more active role at the local level. The *adivasis* organized a struggle in Wayanad in May 2002 with the support of the CPI (M) and the *Adivasi Kshema Samithi*, a left-oriented *adivasi* organization. This was a symbolic struggle in which the *adivasis* built huts on treetops in vested forests to assert their claims to these forestlands. The huts were removed after government assurances to expedite the distribution of land by 1 September 2002.

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[18] Some activists and NGOs told me that the personal commitment of the Chief Minister was the major factor behind the 2001 Agreement. While a minor section of the bureaucracy supported the Agreement, the rest of the government machinery was largely hostile to it.

A survey undertaken in Irulam village as a prelude to implementation showed that 463 *adivasi* families were landless, of which 65 per cent were *Paniyar*, 22 per cent *Kattunaicker*, 9 per cent *Uralis* and 4 per cent *Kurumar*. The village needed 463 acres of land for distribution to the landless, and an additional 284.52 acres for households that owned less than one acre so that all households could have a minimum of one acre.[19] Thus the village needed a total of 747.52 acres of land for distribution. The village had 4676.5 acres of vested forestland within its boundaries. But, after inspection, the Wayanad District Collector recommended a mere 50 acres for distribution as the rest was assessed to be a wildlife movement zone.[20] The Village Office proposed the two coffee plantations in the vested forest area, constituting 300 acres for distribution. The labour trade unions protested, however, particularly in one of the plantations where the majority of the workers were non-*adivasis*.[21] The class - *adivasi* contradictions thus come alive at the local level. Though the importance of connecting with broader social forces had been recognized by the *adivasi* movement, the local instantiations of the class–*adivasi* dynamics and conflict of interests made it difficult to forge broad alliances articulated through class identity, at least in this context. This deviates from Rouse's (1995) argument that political mobilization based on class-consciousness could be more effective than identity politics in forming horizontal alliances, as material inequalities are a common underlying cause of struggles.

The Left, it would seem, was once again caught in a dilemma. While some Left politicians were against distribution of these plantations on the grounds that it would hurt the workers' interests, others were in favour of the move. Discussions with some members of the local unit of the CPI (M) revealed that there was a difference of opinion among them in this matter. They pointed out that the plantation workers were divided into various trade unions, with some having allegiance to Left parties and the others to Congress parties. The Congress trade unions were against the distribution of the plantations and since the Congress coalition was in power there was no chance of distributing the plantations to *adivasis*. Therefore, their position was that it would not make any difference whether the Left trade unions were for or against the distribution of these plantations. In their opinion, if the Congress government was genuinely interested in distributing land to the *adivasis* it was possible to find other lands.

The Irulam village office has informed the government of the available lands, and said that an additional 398 acres have to be found elsewhere to meet the requirement. My field enquiries revealed that there was sufficient land available in the vicinity of the *adivasi* settlements or reasonably close by: lands under the illegal occupation of private/corporate plantations. During the British period, when land was leased out for plantations, a buffer zone of forest area around the plantation site, not officially included in the plantation records, was also included. The agreement was that when the lease period expired the buffer zone should be handed back to the government. However, the lands remain

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[19] Records of the Village Office, Irulam.
[20] Discussion with Village Officer.
[21] These plantations were, in the first place, established for providing employment to *adivasis* (See Kjosavik and Shanmugaratnam 2004).

in the possession and enjoyment of the private plantations. Given the number and extent of these plantations, such lands would be substantial and if reclaimed by the government could be distributed to the *adivasis*. There is a general opinion in the field, among the *adivasis*, the peasant settlers, activists, elected peoples' representatives and government officials, that this is a good opportunity for the government to expropriate such lands under illegal possession, and at the same time solve the *adivasi* land issue. The political will of the state is most crucial for this purpose. There are two private coffee plantations in the village which together account for about 1000 acres on official records. The local people, however, have told me that these plantations, especially one large plantation, may have at least as much area as that of the plantation under illegal possession and that area alone would be sufficient to solve the *adivasi* landlessness in the village.

In spite of the promises, the government discontinued the distribution of land. The *adivasis* reminded the government of the 2001 agreement several times and issued press releases announcing their willingness to wait until the period agreed upon by the Chief Minister expired, that is, until 31 December 2002. After much deliberation among the *adivasis*, it was decided that the *Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha* (AGMS) would assume responsibility for further struggles.[22] On 25 August 2002, thousands of *adivasis* assembled in Mananthavady in Wayanad district to deliberate on the future course of action if the government did not deliver on its promises by December 31 that year. A 'Tribal Court' consisting of 20 women and 40 men representing the different *adivasi* communities was constituted. The AGMS and the Tribal Court were reworkings of the erstwhile traditional socio-political institutions of the *adivasis*. In the past each *adivasi* community had its own such institutions, but the reworked institutions transcend community barriers. One is thus able to discern a further re-articulation of their *positioning*, which indeed is a political project. The Tribal Court publicly declared that if the government did not abide by the 2001 Agreement, the *adivasis* would go ahead and claim their rights by occupying government lands. Unfortunately, no action was forthcoming from the government side. On 4 January 2003, they entered into a historic struggle that came to be known as the 'Muthanga struggle', named after the site in which protest was staged. The 44 days long struggle was brutally suppressed by the Congress government, using police force, which resulted in the death of an *adivasi* and a policeman. Hundreds of *adivasi* men, women and children were seriously wounded, and the leaders were imprisoned and tortured by the police. This event propelled the leadership of the Left parties (in the Opposition) to declare open support for the *adivasi* struggle. A CPI (M) member of the Legislative Assembly engaged in a hunger strike to protest against the brutal government action against the *adivasis*.

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[22] Discussion with *adivasi* activists.

Pre-living Imagined Futures: The Muthanga Struggle

The physical site of the struggle – the *samara bhoomi* (struggle-land) as they call it – was selected with great care. They purposefully avoided the natural forest areas and selected a degraded section of a eucalyptus plantation in Muthanga owned by the State Forest Department. About 1100 *adivasi* families of various communities, *Kurumar, Kurichiyar, Paniyar, Kattunaicker, Adiyar* and *Uralis*, moved into the site on 4 and 5 January 2003.[23] They had given advance notice to the government that they would be occupying these lands. The selection of the degraded eucalyptus plantation as *samara bhoomi* demonstrated the *adivasis'* ecological concerns as well as their attempt to avoid direct confrontation with the State Forest Department, which would have arisen had they occupied a natural forest. This, together with the action of giving advance notice to the government, showed that the *adivasis* configured their struggle within what Roseberry (1996) calls the existing fields of force (See also Li 2001). The *adivasi* actions in Muthanga showed that they acknowledged the legitimacy of the state even in the act and process of challenging it. The land at the *samara bhoomi* was divided into plots of about three hectares each and allotted to individual families. In each plot a house was constructed with bamboo and grasses. The families lived in these houses and cultivated cassava, taro, yams, bananas, and vegetables like amaranthus, bitter gourd and aubergine.[24] Wells were dug to supply drinking water. The plots of the various *adivasi* communities were intermixed so as to allow for closer contact between them, helping to break down the historical hierarchical social practices, promote egalitarian relations and reinforce *adivasi* solidarity. The households were divided into 24 *oorukkoottangal* (village collectives), and members were elected from each *oorukkoottam* to form an *oorusabha* (village assembly). About 50 per cent of the members were women. The *oorusabha* was responsible for supervising the day-to-day activities of the community, including the purchase of foodstuffs using money pooled from the households, and solving any problems which might arise. A young *Paniyan* remembers:

> It was a life we had never experienced before. The various communities were living in harmony and co-operating in various activities. We were busy preparing the field and cultivating crops during the day. At night we kept vigilance to protect the crops from wild animals. Children were reading and studying. We taught our language to the children, told them stories. We sat in groups and remembered our histories. We discussed and debated over future strategies. We had given up alcohol. There was no wife-beating either. We learned to treat women with respect. We were advised and helped by the volunteers. It was a life we had dreamed for our future. But the government shattered it with gunshots.
> (A young *Paniyan*)

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[23] Discussions with an *adivasi* activist.
[24] Discussions with *adivasis* who participated in the Muthanga struggle.

A middle-aged *Kattunaicker* woman told me: 'The 44 days in *samara bhoomi* were like a dream. My husband did not drink alcohol. We had no fights at home. My children were happy and read their schoolbooks. We hoped that the government would let us stay there.' The hopes and dreams of the *adivasis* are reflected in these statements. Evidently, *adivasi* lives were changing through the experience at Muthanga. 'Each one reminded the other, this is our self-rule area. So we must set an example with our exemplary behaviour' (a *Kuruman* elder).

As mentioned earlier, the government crushed the struggle after 44 days. Though the *adivasis* were forced out of Muthanga, the event marked a historic moment in the *adivasi* life of Kerala. They were able to re-engage the state, the media, the intellectuals and the larger Kerala society in ways that had not been possible hitherto.[25] The image of the *adivasis* had been redefined through this struggle. As Kunhaman (2003: 66) succinctly states: 'The success of that struggle was the struggle itself'. The image of the 'helpless', 'illiterate' and 'uncivilized' *adivasi* has been replaced by the image of an *adivasi* who has been engaging in a militant struggle for their rights. Thus the *adivasis* redefined themselves through this struggle.

The Muthanga struggle, therefore, cannot be reduced to a mere struggle for land; it came to symbolize a people's aspiration for a different future. The decision to occupy their ancestral lands in Muthanga had symbolic meanings as well as material implications. In the first place, it was an overt assertion of *adivasi* agency mediated through the reconstituted socio-political institutions, the AGMS and the Tribal Court. At the same time it was a symbolic and physical enactment of their autonomy as a people, an expression of their attachment to place, and a proclamation of their inalienable rights to ancestral lands. It is important to understand that they were not reproducing the pre-existing *adivasi* institutions but reconstituting them, after sifting through and retaining what they perceived as the positive features and discarding the regressive ones, and at the same time embracing a new approach that transcended the inter-community hierarchies and incorporated gender concerns. They did not reject the idea of development either, as some 'green orientalists' would like them to.[26] Indeed, visions of modernity were imagined into the struggle. The adoption of modern systems of property rights in land, that is, individual holdings; the demand for individual titles to land; the practice of modern agriculture in the *samara bhoomi*; and the importance given to the education of children and youth all encompass visions of a life that would benefit from modernity. Evidently, they do not want to live in a frozen past, but rather in a dynamic future. A new philosophy of life can thus be read into the Muthanga struggle: it was a reflection of their re-imagined future lives and identities orchestrated

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[25] See Raj (2003) for a compilation of responses of the media, activists and intellectuals.
[26] Green orientalists, whether western or local, view traditional peoples 'as a modernity-free cultural reserve to be fenced off…' (Lohmann 1993: 203). See Said (1978) for the idea of Orientalism. Some environmentalists of mainstream persuasion in Kerala denounced the Muthanga struggle on the grounds that the *samara bhoomi* was part of a wildlife sanctuary, though the site selected by the *adivasis* was in fact a eucalyptus plantation growing cheap wood for the corporate sector.

around the question of land rights. Through the Muthanga struggle, it would seem they were pre-living a new 'social imaginary'. The 'imaginary' accounts for the specific orientation of social institutions, the constitution of motives and needs and the existence of symbolism and tradition (Thompson 1984, following Castoriadis 1975).

> This element, which endows the functionality of each institutional system with its specific orientation, which overdetermines the choice and connections of symbolic networks, which creates for each historical period its singular way of living, seeing and making its own existence, its world and its relations to it…is nothing other than the *imaginary* of the society or period concerned. (Castoriadis 1975: 203 quoted in Thompson 1984: 23)

The struggle of the *adivasis* continues. Following the Muthanga struggle, the *adivasis* have occupied state lands in various regions of Wayanad. In Irulam village there are three new *samara bhoomi* – one located in vested forestland, and the other two in the Cheeyambam and Mariyanad coffee plantations under the control of the Kerala Forest Development Corporation. The government has not taken any action to stop them. It would seem that the government was either trying to regain its moral image following the controversial suppression of the *adivasi* community at Muthanga; or else was paralyzed into inaction. The *adivasi* families have divided the *samara bhoomi* into several plots of between one and two hectares each, and each family has built a hut and is living there.[27] In Cheeyambam plantation there were 203 such families who had occupied the plantation on 28 March 2003, soon after the Muthanga struggle. They were doing all the agronomic operations in the coffee plantation, such as weeding and pruning. They were not paid any wages by the plantation management. They were also cultivating root and tuber crops, vegetables and other food crops intermixed with the coffee plants in an effort to sustain themselves. Their demand was that the plantation should be distributed among them. They were determined to continue the struggle until they received land. 'Come so far, there is no turning back. We have only one way – forward' (A young *Paniya* woman).

Conclusion

Using Stuart Hall's conception of identity as an articulated positioning, this paper has attempted to analyse the dynamic articulation of indigenous people's identities in their struggle for land. The indigenous peoples' articulation of identity as *adivasis* and the re-articulation of their sub-identities as particular communities with specific spiritual and material attachment to place can be viewed as conjunctural positionings that would serve them well in their struggle for land. This positioning,

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[27] Discussions with the *adivasis* who had occupied the Cheeyambam *samara bhoomi* during my last field visit in December 2003.

however, need neither be fixed for all time and for all struggles nor need it preclude them from articulating other positionings into the *adivasi* identity. Such a politics would be '…able to build those forms of solidarity and identification which make common struggle and resistance possible but without suppressing the real heterogeneity of interests and identities, and… can effectively draw the political lines without which political contestation is impossible, without fixing those boundaries for eternity' (Hall 1996: 444).

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