

The Politics of Plantation Development and Formation of 'Tribal Settlements': Life and Livelihood of the Mannans in the Cardamom Hills of India

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Abstract : Cardamom Hills geographically falls into the Western Ghat region in the state of Kerala (India). The fame of these hills dates back to antiquity as the abode of various indigenous communities and treasure house of spices like cardamom. With the colonial conquest over the region, the evergreen forests got converted into zones of mono-cropping with commercial crops such as coffee, tea, cardamom etc. on plantation basis; a process which has been further accentuated with the migration of settlers during the post-independent times. Curiously, when Cardamom Hills are better known today as the plantation belt of the country or as one of the most fostering grounds of agrarian capitalism producing the lion share of Indian cardamom, the indigenous communities of the place such as the Mannans got alienated of their ancestral lands, became inter-generational proletariats and got reduced into 'segmented spaces' called the settlements. While dispossession of land for plantations has dislocated the economic life of the Mannans, the migration of the settlers has resulted into a complete social, cultural, political and demographic dominion over them. This has not only relegated their existential relations, history, culture and association with the place but also condensed them as the 'Other' in their own territories. Therefore inquisitively, violation of rights of the communities like Mannans, encroachment of their lands, negation towards their very existence and distortion of their history gets defined as the 'Manifest Destiny' of the people and place whereby its inevitability gets manufactured. This paper is an attempt to elicit the ways in which the formation of Mannan settlements are interconnected to the historical reality and contemporary opulence of the plantation industry in the place. The arguments put forth by this study is based on extensive ethnographic fieldwork conducted in various Mannan settlements in the cardamom hills. The study basically dwells on to the methodological premises of multi-sited ethnography wherein information was gathered from different sites such as settlements, plantations and other interactive spaces wherein the Mannans from the settlements engages in socio-economic, cultural and political relations. Such an attempt was made to understand in depth the associations and interactions that people in the settlements have among themselves and others. The study equally uses the method of oral history to understand the alternative history, the socio-cultural and economic life of the people before the importation of plantations to the place. The paper gauges into the ways in which settlements imprisons generations of Mannans into plantation work and acts as moulds for subservient, hardworking plantation labourers.

Keywords : Cardamom Hills, plantations, labourers, Mannans, segmented spaces, settlements

Conference Title : ICIP 2017 : International Conference on Indigenous Peoples

Conference Location : Madrid, Spain

Conference Dates : March 26-27, 2017