The Plantation Labour and the Performance of Identity: Categorical Oppression in the South Indian Tea Belt

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September 2018
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This publication is part of a lecture series on ‘migration’. We express our gratitude to Takshila Educational Society for supporting the lecture series.
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This paper is concerned with the way the migrant workers are classified and understood in their new work place in terms of their categories of identity. They are often placed at the bottom of hierarchical relations both inside as well as outside their workplace. I term this phenomena as 'categorical oppression' through which the migrant workers are reproduced both as a source of cheap labour and as one of the most stigmatised groups within larger social hierarchies. In the analysis here, categorical oppression refers to how different categories of identity of the workers including class, ethnicity, language, and place of origin are stigmatised. In the migrant context, this paper tries to understand how these placement of the workers' categories of identity at the bottom of categorical relationships make their existence painful. The workers' categories of identity has serious implications for the way they experience the life situation in the new workplace. Focusing on the situational selection of categories of identity, the paper will trace out the significance of 'categorical oppression' both for the production relations and for the wider social relations among the migrant labour.

Categories of identity has been a major concern of anthropological research on labour migration since the 1950s (Mitchell 1956; Epstein 1992; Brettell 2000; Eriksen 2005). It has been addressed mainly around two aspects: First, how various forms of workers' identity based on language, assumed racial identity/ethnicity, gender and region were employed in the reproduction of class order in the plantations (Burawoy 1972; Bourgois 1989). Philippe Bourgois (1989) termed this

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2 In the capitalist production relations, forms of the migrant workers' identity are stigmatised, inferior-ized and used to further reproduce them within the capitalist production relations. Such inferior-ized identity of the workers creates a dead end for them in the new social setting as their experience of class marginality intensifies their experience of the stigmatised identity. The way identity is engaged outside the workspace also facilitates capitalist production. Therefore, one must extend the role of identity from the production space to the workers' own private space (Raj 2014).
process as 'conjugated oppression' which has become a popular term for understanding the use of social identities in the capitalist production relations (Shah and Lerche 2017). In the Indian case for example, the traditional values of caste-ritual status have been appropriated and symbolically engaged to affirm class position and to facilitate the naturalization of the class order in the plantation settings (Mayer 1961; Jayawardena 1963; Raj 2013).

Second, what 'identity' really means for the migrant workforce beyond its use in the production relations (Daniel 1996; Jayawardena 1968). In other words, how forms of identity are evoked within the broader social relations in a migrant context. For example, the way Tamil workers in Sri Lanka experience themselves being a migrant labour is not limited to capitalist forces employing their identity in reproducing them as labour (Daniel 1996). Beyond that point, the function of their identity had implications for the way their language and predominantly lower caste origin was understood and placed within the violence of the Sri Lankan state against Tamil minorities. This should be understood as categorical oppression since it emerges from the location of plantation Tamils in the larger categorical relations and social construction of identities (Mitchell 1956; Barth 1969). My own conceptualisation of categorical oppression is inspired by the terms 'categorical relations' from J Clyde Mitchell (1956) and 'conjugated oppression' from Philippe Bourgois (1988; 1989a; 1989b).

J Clyde Mitchell is quite useful in understanding how different categories of identity are understood and play out in the migrant context. For Clyde Mitchell, categorical relations are social relationship formed on the basis of general abstract stereotypical categories, where both external classifications and self-identifications are used to categorise people that forms the basis for certain social relationships in the new social context. Mitchell discusses the concept of categorical relations in his classic article, 'The Kalela Dance' (1956), which is concerned with how tribalism becomes an important category of social relationship among the migrant workers in the Zambian copper mines.

For Mitchell, the meaning and function of categories of identity is largely informed by the system of social relationships in various contexts. Mitchell argues that tribalism in villages and the urban industrial context is not similar. The relevance
and meaning of categories of identity in a rural context is totally different from those in the urban or plantation industrial contexts (for e.g.: Being a Tamil in Tamil villages vis-a-vis the plantations have different meanings and functions). In other words, Mitchell stresses the situated meaning of the categories of identity based on perceived similarities and differences that are engaged by the migrant workers to regenerate social relationships as they are forced to live among strangers in the urban industrial complexes (Kapferer 1995).

While Mitchell’s discussion of categorical relationship is quite rich and useful, he was not that concerned about stigmatisation and employment of categories of identity in the workplace. He did discuss about the relationship between colonial industrial exploitation and the resistance against it based on tribal nationalism; social distancing of tribes from each other; and also how the colonial state categorised different tribal groups based on the colonial officials’ stereotypical and abstract understanding of the tribal culture. But his formulation is not fundamentally concerned with how stigma of being placed at the bottom of hierarchical relationship highly influences the way the migrant workers actually live their life. This aspect of stigma and discrimination is emphasized by Philippe Bourgois in his discussion of ‘conjugated oppression’ of migrant workforce. While Mitchell’s categorical relations originates from Zambian Mines, Bourgois’ conjugated oppression comes from Puerto Rican plantations.

Bourgois discusses the role of identity in the reproduction of United Fruit Company’s banana plantations in the territory extending over the border of Panama and Costa Rica. Inspired by the interrelationship of class, power and ethnicity, Bourgois argues that the plantations’ production order is reproduced through what he calls as hierarchization of ethnicity in which Whites, Blacks, Hispanics, Kuna and Guaymi Amerindians are hierarchically located in the plantation production order. In other words, Mitchell stresses the situated meaning of the categories of identity based on perceived similarities and differences that are engaged by the migrant workers to regenerate social relationships as they are forced to live among strangers in the urban industrial complexes (Kapferer 1995).
words, the economic exploitation of the workers is complemented by ideological oppression rooted in ethnic discrimination as the occupational hierarchy feeds into the ethnic hierarchy. In Bourgois' own words, “The concept of conjugated oppression, whereby an ideological dynamic of ethnic discrimination interacts explosively with an economic dynamic of class exploitation to produce an overwhelming experience of oppression that is more than the sum of its parts” (1989b: 641). Bourgois stresses on the importance of ethnicity for class analysis since the hostile ethnicity and the subtle humiliation of stigmatised communities reproduces the power relations in the workplace. The ethnic hierarchy in the workplace forms the basis for essentialized ethnic stereotypes, 'which produces charged belief systems (around) ethnicity' (1988: 332). For example, Kuna were considered to be 'clean, honest, polite, and skilful with their hands….but they are useless for heavy work' (ibid: 339). In contrast, Guaymi were considered good for dangerous field jobs involving prolonged exposure to sun such as harvesting and clearing drainage; but they were considered unreliable for skilled jobs (ibid: 339). For Bourgois, ethnicity and class reproduces each other which facilitates the power relations required for the plantation production. In other words, conjugated oppression is a combined oppression of economic exploitation and ethnic stereotypes in Bourgois' analysis.

Bourgois' incisive formulation however misses few things. He focuses only on ethnic identity (in the sense of racial identity) as a category of discrimination. He does not consider discriminations associated with other categories such as the stigma attached to places of social origin, and language. In fact, being a migrant worker itself is a potential category of discrimination that reproduces the class order in the plantations. Moreover, Bourgois' use of conjugated oppression as an instrument of class order confines the potential function of categorical relations to the reproduction of production relations. Thus, conjugated oppression resonates with the Marxian idea of social forces of production. Then the limitation of 'conjugated oppression' is that, despite their role in facilitating production relations, categorical relations are not reducible to production relations even in industrial settings. For instance, the workers' identity of being a Tamil Dalit cannot be reduced to the role of facilitator of class order in the plantations. This is because implications of caste and linguistic identities for the workers in the plantation setting goes
Beyond their role as a social factor of production. Alpa Shah and Jens Lerche (2017) elaborates the idea of conjugated oppression to include different axes of oppression including caste, gender, tribe and region. They also note that the conjugated oppression occurs not only in capitalist relations, but also in other situations. But conjugated oppression still seems to privilege class over other categories of identity which are almost treated as elements of class relations.

While Bourgois looks at how ethnicity based hierarchical relations become the centre of ideological oppression of different ethnic groups, I focus on a single group (Tamil Dalits) and their relationships to different categories of identity in the migrant context. In categorical oppression however class is one of the categories of identity just as other categories that are used to stigmatise the workers. The difference between conjugated oppression and categorical oppression is that the latter considers different categories of identity into account and also considers the categorical oppression in its full potential beyond its role as a facilitator of capitalist production. I bring together Mitchell's insights on the complexities of categorical relationships and Bourgois' emphasis on emergence of oppression from class and ethnic hierarchies in the workplace to advance categorical oppression.

In order to recognise categorical oppression, one needs to understand plantation as a socio-cultural areal (Mintz 1989) and to examine the transformations in both the life situation of the workers and their society at large. Sidney Mintz developed a systematic understanding of how the Caribbean plantation workers were placed within the global history of colonialism and capitalism (Mintz 1974; 1989). At the same time, he was also concerned about how the workers live through such a history and beyond. For example, his book 'Worker in the Cane' is a life history of his friend Don Taso who was a cane cutter in a sugar plantation in Puerto Rico (Mintz 1974). The way Mintz captures Taso's life is much more than Taso being a cane worker reproduced by global history. Mintz vividly discusses how Taso, who was a member of a radical trade union group, seeks salvation as a protestant Christian at the end. This transition of Taso, who later became a protestant Christian is important to understand the lived reality of identity at the local level. To be sure, while it was important for Sidney Mintz to place the lived reality of plantation workers into the larger prism of global history, he was very particular that identity should be
extended to its implications for lived reality of the migrant workers.

What follows is an ethnographic account in which the categories of identity of the Tamil tea workers in Kerala’s tea plantations are evoked, employed, challenged and experienced. In all these cases, we find traces of how categories of identity are used by the capitalist production as well as by the workers themselves. Let me first give a general overview of the history of the Tamil plantation workers in Kerala.

**Tamil Plantation Labour in Kerala: Historical Context**

The colonial plantations across the world are built by the cheap migrant labour who also contributed significantly to the development of colonial mines and industrial complexes. India was a major supplier of the workers under indentured and Kangani systems particularly in the Caribbean Islands, Southeast Asia, South Asia and Southern Africa (Carter 1996; Amrith 2013; Kumar 2017). The indentured servitude became a prominent institutional practice after the abolition of slavery in the British Empire in 1833 and in the French colonies in 1848. Being the largest component of Indian emigration during colonial era (Guilmoto 1993), Tamil indentured workers - mostly belong to lower caste communities - were sent to coffee, sugar and tea plantations around Indian ocean particularly to Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Malaya (Malaysia), Burma (Union of Myanmar) and princely state of Travancore (South Indian state of Kerala). Comparatively fewer workers were also received by Fiji, Guyana and Mauritius, where labour force came mostly from northern India, particularly Bihar and Eastern UP (cf. Mayer 1961; Jayawardena 1963; V. Lal 1993).

During power transition from colonial empires to local people after the Second World War, almost all Tamil workers from Burma and a significant number from Sri Lanka were expelled from the newly formed countries, and they were transported back to India. This expulsion and the formation of post-colonial state became a decisive moment for the second/third/fourth generation Tamil plantation workers as they became an ethnic and linguistic minority group, as a least accepted citizenry in the newly formed countries. The way the workers were understood and classified in

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* There are of course internal differentiation within the Tamil Dalits as Pallar, Paraiyar and Arunthathiyar claims to be located hierarchically superior to one another. In the plantation production relations however these subcastes are clubbed together as Tamil Dalits by the company officials and trade union leaders of Malayalam speaking dominant communities in the tea belt. The homogenisation of the Tamil Dalits is situation specific as will be discussed in the paper.
these countries became crucial for the larger inter-ethnic relations and the nature of citizenships in these countries. In fact, my concentration on tea estate workers addresses a significant section of the international Tamil Diaspora.

The Tamil tea plantation workers in Kerala are also descendants of the indentured labourers brought to work in the colonial plantations established in the 1860s (Baak 1997; Raman 2010). While the majority of the workers for the Northeast Plantations were brought from the tribal communities of Bihar, Orissa and Nepal, it was Tamils of the outcaste communities who constituted the majority labour force in the South Indian Plantations (Guilmoto 1993; Hoerder 2002). Tamil workers in the Peermade tea belt, among whom I did my ethnographic research, were part of this colonial indentured system. As the majority of the plantation Tamils belong to the Dalit communities, they have been marginalized within Indian society and have otherwise been thoroughly alienated for centuries. This outcaste social status allied with the identity of Tamil coolie – a stigmatised category of manual labour – perpetuated their economic underdevelopment and social marginality.

The stigma attached to the categories of workers' identity is very important here. The history of many as having once been bonded labourers (effectively slaves), a low status by virtue of their Tamil linguistic identity in Kerala, and being from the “wild” highlands rather than from the settled and “civilized” lowland valleys – operate to give them a low stigmatized social/cultural worth. Such reduced value is highlighted when contrasted to the high socio-cultural value accorded in Kerala to those conceived as being high caste, upper/middle class, Malayalam-speaking and living in the lowland villages and towns. The stigma that attaches to the plantation workers achieves greater force in the relatively little control that the workers have over their life situations (function of their effectively being an underclass) that is linked to their history of alienation. Although in many contexts there have been reforms addressing marginalized populations – Kerala is an outstanding example in this regard – those who entered within the indentured plantation labour system continue to be a highly socially excluded and marginalized category.

**From Caste to Class: Transformations in the organising principle of plantation society**

In the plantation setting, the crude hierarchies in the workplace was largely...
modelled on the villages of social origin of the Tamil workers. They were defined as aliens, criminals, sub-humans, hardworking but unintelligent/ignorant, lazy, cons etc. They were housed according to their caste or native villages/regions. But the housing based on region was only applicable to Dalit castes, while the backward caste minorities demanded separate settlement from the Dalits. And within Dalits themselves, the hierarchy operated significantly between the Arunthathiyar, Paraiyar and the Pallar. However, the graded caste hierarchy within the tea belt was fiercely fought by the Dalits, for example, for entry into the newly built temples in the plantations (Raj 2014).

But over time due to the rigid capitalist production relations, class became an important identity in the plantations. Most aspects of the plantation worker’s lives were defined in relation to the production order structured by the plantation management. The planters effectively used families as they employed sexual division of labour with women being tea pluckers and the men being factory workers and both men and women participating in weeding and pruning of bushes etc. So under the rigid plantation production system, aspects of social process outside the plantation system had transformed to fit into the class order of plantation production, as in the case of caste system. In the Peermade tea belt, caste as a ritually structured system is redefined in terms of the plantation productive system in that caste is perceived there as an occupational category determined by the economic order. This was how colonial officials and entrepreneurs conceived of caste (Dirks 2001) and it was a conception that was the logic used to underpin the recruitment of indentured labourers. Such a construction perceived caste as equivalent to class identity or status, a culturally specific example of social stratification. This denied caste as a dimension of a ritually defined hierarchical system unrelated to the stratificational system based on economically grounded political order (see Dumont 1980).

Within such a class order, caste identity does not yield much superior status in everyday interaction in the plantation because the plantation system itself is the social system in the plantation, and everyday interaction in the plantation is largely conditioned by the production process itself. This means that, although Nadars, Vellalas and Ezhavas are higher castes when compared to Dalits, they enjoy only a
slightly higher status within the social domain of workers' society. In fact, this slightly superior status of non-Dalits are maintained by their higher position in the occupational hierarchy as they take supervisorial and other skilled positions. This is the same in the graded caste hierarchy within the Dalits. While Pallar and Paraiyar consider themselves superior to Arunthathiyar within the caste hierarchy among Dalits, the claim of higher caste status does not wield much social power as they are not acknowledged by the Arunthathiyar. Although the Dalit workforce belong to different castes and sub castes, they have to live together in the layam, and have to draw water from the same pipe. Such relative egalitarian practice is integral to the logic of the situation that is the living circumstances on the plantations and the determination of social relations in the productive system of the plantations.

However, I would like to underline the fact that the caste system in its abstract form was a major factor in initially bringing different caste groups into the plantation and in creating the occupational order of the plantation system (cf. Hollup 1994). This was clearly evident particularly in the post-colonial phase where caste in its classic form was very much present in the plantation class structure with Brahmins, Nairs and Syrian Christians at the top as the owners/managers, most lower (known as 'Scheduled' in the State nomenclature) castes –such as Ezhavas/Nadars and Vellalas – and lower class Christians at the middle as superintendants/field officers/clerks/supervisors and Dalits such as Pallar, Paraiyar, and Arunthathiyar and Dalit Christians at the very bottom as supervisors and wage workers.

There are some circumstances when caste consciousness becomes important to social relations and an attempt is made to reformulate the particular social identity/category (that is of caste and sub-castes) that originally mediated social relations in the places of their social origin in Tamil Nadu. For example, people who belong to the same sub-caste greet each other with kinship terms meant for blood relatives, which they do not usually use when they refer to the people who belong to other castes/sub castes. Thus Mama/Athai (meaning mother's brother/Father's sister or the husband of father's sister/wife of mother's brother) or Chithappa/Chitti (meaning Father's Younger Brother or the husband of mother's younger sister/mother's younger Sister or wife of father's younger brother). This act of reformulating caste identity outside the workplace is an example of the
communalization of caste, a process of attempts to differentiate with others to enhance the social status/prestige. As Jayawardena points out in the context of Indian labourers in British Guiana, a high caste can add to, and a lower caste can detract from, the prestige of a status achieved on other grounds (1963). The use of kinship terms for caste relations in the plantations is an aspect of situational selection of categories of identities (cf. Gluckman 1958), as discussed by Clyde Mitchell (1956) in the case of intertribal relations in the copper belt of Zambia.

To be clear, the traditional values of caste still have force in the wider society but have been appropriated into the system of class relations in the plantations. The values of caste ritual status are now symbolically engaged to affirm class position. In other words, this symbiotic relationship between caste and class seems to facilitate the naturalization of the class order in the plantation, which should be seen as an aspect of categorical oppression. In fact, the economic crisis in the Indian tea industry and the weakening of the plantation system however re-engaged the caste hierarchy among the plantation workers, as will be discussed below.

**Economic Crisis: Moment of Escalating Identity**

The recent economic crisis in the tea industry was largely consequent upon the neo-liberal structural adjustments in the Indian Economy. These made a deep impact on the plantation life, since they ended the hitherto relatively encapsulated and isolated contexts of the plantations. Until the liberal reforms, the plantations were largely socio-economic systems unto themselves and separated from the wider economic and cultural contexts within which they were located. With the neo liberal reforms, workers who had been confined to plantation life for more than five generations were now compelled to seek work outside, since many of the plantations closed down production partially or completely. Some of the workers who sought work outside the plantations either went back with their families to their native village in Tamil Nadu or to industrial townships such as Coimbatore and Tirupur. As for those who remained in the plantations, the men became labourers in the booming construction industry (mainly commuting to work in lowland cities and towns) while women became contract workers on the plantations and/or were

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This situation parallels with Clyde Mitchell's study (1956) of Kalela Dance in Zambian copper belt that although the social relations in the copper belt was largely determined by the production system itself; the social relation outside the work situation is largely influenced by differences in tribal membership (Kapferer 1995).
employed in the government-supported Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme.

Accordingly, the economic crisis became a decisive event in plantation life and society, inducing transformations in the existing plantation order and social institutions, producing new institutions/practices in plantation life and, more crucially, exposing plantation workers to the outside world. Thus the temporary closure of the plantations (and consequent opening up of the hitherto closed institutions of the plantations to the outside world) forced plantation communities into a radical renegotiation and reorganization of the terms of their existence. I stress that the temporary crisis was of cataclysmic proportions to be compared, indeed, with the kind of shock that natural calamities such as earthquakes and tsunamis can have on local populations.

The crisis became a moment when the possible contradictions of identity comes out strongly. Tamil Dalit labourers, which reveals aspects of the wider system in which a disadvantaged caste community re-encounters, in a vastly different historical situation, a socio-political order from which they had, for a time, been significantly shielded. Critically, as identity and as a relational organizing principle caste achieved a new significance suppressing class relations relevant to the industrial system of the relatively enclosed plantation system. For the plantation workers, caste was a re-discovered import in its meshing with the class processes of the world external to the plantations. The plantation workers thus encountered dimensions of the stigma that was attached to Dalit as well as Tamil identity, as the workers were exposed to the new forms of subsistence relations.

Let me present here a situation in which a retired worker from the plantation faces severe caste discrimination when she moved out of the plantation to her village of social origin. The situation of Saraswathi, a female retired worker in her early sixties, illustrates the dilemma and struggles of retired workers, for she had to face the worst experiences of untouchability for being a Dalit woman. Saraswathi’s situation reveals that moving to their villages of social origin in Tamil Nadu was not a viable option for the retirees. The intense practice of caste system in Tamil Villages that led them to be discriminated against badly for being Dalits. Of course, caste processes have changed historically over time but in many places those changes of
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In fact, categories of identity was severely reconfigured in the crisis context when there was a shift from the homogenised class identity of being workers in the plantations to differentiated occupational identity as the workers enter into different occupations. The workers as they commute to different workplace they experience and make an effort to place their identity in a manner different from that in the plantation. As I have discussed elsewhere (Raj 2014), Back in the plantations, the plantation workers differentiate themselves economically and socially (through the politics of decency where the workers make an attempt to locate others below them by claiming that their new found occupations is better than that of others). Saraswathy feared someone using her situation to assert their own superior capacities to control life’s chances, status and to cope with the crisis. Saraswathi asked me not to disclose other workers about the discriminations and forms of untouchability that her family experienced in her native village. Although many workers would be sympathetic to her miseries, there could be a few who would taunt

In the village, the ‘untouchable’ Dalits did not have the right to sit inside the tea shop and drink tea nor do they have the right to drink tea in a glass cup (kuppi glass). The Dalits have to stand outside the tea shop and have to drink either from a coconut shell or a steel cup depending upon the availability. Since Saraswathi and family were not used to these explicit everyday forms of untouchability rooted in the ritual aspects of the caste system, the caste humiliation they experienced in Kallupetti was intense and higher than for those Dalits who were originally born and brought up in the village. This is because, as mentioned earlier, they were relatively shielded from the explicit caste discriminations due to the dominance of class dimensions in the plantation production system. This means that Saraswathi had grown up enjoying the relatively egalitarian social relations which were made possible on plantations where the higher castes had little power compared to their counterparts in Tamil Nadu. Accordingly, the economic crisis and the consequent deferral of the retirement benefits forced the migration of plantation Tamil Dalits back into the caste atrocities from which they had originally attempted to escape when they had first migrated to the plantations.

In fact, categories of identity was severely reconfigured in the crisis context when there was a shift from the homogenised class identity of being workers in the plantations to differentiated occupational identity as the workers enter into different occupations. The workers as they commute to different workplace they experience and make an effort to place their identity in a manner different from that in the plantation. As I have discussed elsewhere (Raj 2014), Back in the plantations, the plantation workers differentiate themselves economically and socially (through the politics of decency where the workers make an attempt to locate others below them by claiming that their new found occupations is better than that of others). Saraswathy feared someone using her situation to assert their own superior capacities to control life’s chances, status and to cope with the crisis. Saraswathi asked me not to disclose other workers about the discriminations and forms of untouchability that her family experienced in her native village. Although many workers would be sympathetic to her miseries, there could be a few who would taunt...
Trade unions, which were the most important category of group formation and political association under the plantation production system, were taken over by caste and religious groups expressing these sectional interests. While trade unions are still active in the plantations, they have become instruments in sectional interests connected with religion and caste identity that were previously marginalized. The group formation within the plantation shows us that the categories of identity of the workers is something evolve all the time where the forms of identity within the categorical relations in the native villages is in a dialectic relation with the ascribed identity in the new workplace. For example, the identity of being belong to a particular caste or region in Tamil Nadu is taken over by new forms of identity such as being a Christian convert, or member of a particular trade union also become significant.

Trade unions in the Peermade tea belt struggled to retain the class identity of the workforce through dividing the plantation fields in the closed plantation for tea plucking based on trade union membership. This division of tea fields created severe division between the workers. As various trade unions took different stand with regard to managing the closed plantations and also on the questioning of terms for reopening them, the workers increasingly became divided on basis of trade union membership. When it comes to workers' identity and trade unions, there is a serious contradictions in terms of how the gender question within the plantations is addressed. Women being the majority of the plantation workforce also have membership in the trade unions. But paradoxically, they are totally left out not only from the trade union leadership but also from active participation. As Leela Fernandes (1997) argued in the case of women workers in the jute industry, the trade unions are only concerned about the category of class whereas the identity of gender and sexual division of labour is very important to be addressed in order to bring out a class struggle.

Let me provide a short description of a recent strike in Munnar tea belt of Kerala.
This story opens up the contradiction between the trade union leadership and the women workers in Kerala's tea plantation, in terms of their engagement with the categorical relations. In September 2015, almost all the women workers in Munnar tea belt went on strike demanding higher bonus rate and increase in wages from INR 230 to INR 500. Interestingly, they organised themselves autonomously outside the trade unions and in fact they went against the trade unions. They demanded that the corrupt alliance between the tea company and the trade unions should stop. Eventually they formed an union after the strike, which came to be known as Pembillai Orumai, meaning Women's Unity. This strike was indeed a major event in the history of workers' struggle.

During the strike, the women workers as well as the trade unions engaged with the categorical relations of the tea belt. The police did not confront them when they blocked national highway that passes through the tea belt, and they did not confront them when they also disrupted the functioning of the Sales Point of the Tea Company. My observation is that the reason why the women workers were not confronted by the police not only because they were women workers but also because they were Tamils. If Tamil women were attacked in Kerala, there will be reaction from neighbouring Tamil Nadu. And the striking women understood this point and they cleverly used it. On the other hand, the trade union leaders argued that the strike was supported by extremist forces from Tamil Nadu and thus questioning the legitimacy of the strike. In a way, Tamil women as well as leaders of trade union dominated by Malayalam speaking upper caste men used the ethnolinguistic identity of Tamil in vastly different manner. The ascriptions of Tamil identity to ethno-linguistic nationalism was brought in by the trade unions as an attempt to demean the workers and to delegitimise their strike. I claim that this should be seen as an element of categorical oppression as the trade unions employed categories of identity of the workers to stigmatise them and their struggle.

**Concluding remarks: Categorical Oppression**

It is clear in the article that the way the workers' experience their stigmatised forms of identity such as being a Tamil Dalit underclass retiree living in remote plantation highlands cannot be reduced to its role as a facilitator for capitalist production. Within the categorical relations of Kerala, being a Tamil linguistic minority, belong
to Dalit working class and living in highland, being women, being older are either stigmatised or considered inferior categories that cannot be sorted out into the rubric of single category such as class as argued by James Ferguson (1990, pp. 128-134). The performance of different categories of identity needs to be located in the larger web of categorical relations in the new setting. Therefore my focus in the article has not only been on how individual migrant workers employ the identity but also on how categories of workers’ identity is understood in the migrant context by others. This is very important to understand why certain Tamils, specifically the working class Tamils in Kerala were identified as Pandi, a commonly used ethnic slur.

The different situations discussed above suggest that the migrant workers are incorporated into the categorical relations of their new society as stigmatised and inferior-ized communities. The migrant workers’ mere presence demand that the categories of their identity is subjected to the reconstitution of the categorical relations in the local society (for example, within the tea belt); and it feeds into the cultural stereotypes of a particular community at a much broader level. In other words, as they move into a new society of plantations and mines, they also have to carry overburdening racial stereotypes which is employed by the dominant communities in ‘placing’ the migrant workers at the bottom of categorical relations, both inside and outside the workplace. This is exactly what categorical oppression means here. It creates a larger rupture in their life situation that not only facilitates the social reproduction of them as cheap migrant labour, but it also plays a central role in keeping them in a liminal situation outside the plantation. It is also clear that the migrant workers are not mere spectators. They had also attempted to engage with categorical relations in their favour as the striking women had used their Tamil identity. However, most often their creative engagement with the categorical relations remained as a dialectical response to the stigmatisation of the categories of their identity.

In sum, categorical oppression lies in the way caste and linguistic identity was used within the plantation order to rationalise the production hierarchy; in the way caste reappeared as they were forced to move to the Tamil Villages and to the Kerala towns in the crisis context; and in the way the organisations related to plantation economy
such as trade unions employed the Tamil identity of the workforce. The oppression of the plantation Tamils through the stigmatised ethnic stereotypes in the context of economic crisis had more to do with the larger categorical relations than the production relations itself. Although, ethnic identity in the context of production relations was a major concern of Philippe Bourgois' conjugated oppression it is not enough to capture the oppression associated with categorical relations. My attempt in this article was therefore to bring in the insights of Clyde Mitchell's categorical relations into the discussion of Bourgois' conjugated oppression in the socio-cultural and economic field (Mintz 1989; Mitchell 1956) to provide a holistic understanding of how different categories of identity plays out for the migrant labour.

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