



At the Juncture of Nature, Labour and Capital: The case of Aralam Cashew Farms in Kannur, Kerala

ANJANA H KUMAR

Jawaharlal Nehru University, India

The global value system framework (henceforth GVS) understands the world political economy as a system wherein, *“different parts of a single commodity is conceived, designed, produced, procured and processed across different parts of the world and converge at a point to be assembled, after which it finds itself again in the global market.”* (2019). Jha and Yeros (2022) write that *“economic activities connected with the production and realisation of a final good or service, are not only split into major segments such as design, manufacturing, marketing, etc., but each one of these get further segmented into specialised subsegments and tasks, and are dispersed to different locations, many of these across the globe, but often within a centralised command structure.”* Such a system decentralises production and centralises capital to aid accumulation. Such an accumulation finds its genesis in the very genesis of capitalism, and its colonial expeditions. The said primitive accumulation created mammoth income divergences in what we today identify as Global North and Global South. Under finance capital, it manifests as structural adjustment plans, aids from international organisations and so on, where the coerced incorporation of domestic actors ensure a global constellation of value creation and appropriation, controlled by transnational corporations. This has not just resulted in the impoverishment of the historically poorer nations, but also an informalisation of sub-systems under GVS. The system then gets reproduced via asymmetric power relations, penetrating through existing social institutions and creating historically distinct relations of production. GVS theory then becomes not just an explanation of concrete situation of the world political economy, but rather a tool to change it.

GVS of Cashew

The GVS of Cashew economy finds its root in the Portuguese expeditions, where this native plant of Brazil, is introduced to Mozambique and India in the 16th Century to curb soil erosion. (Harilal et al., 2006) With the British colonial expeditions of 19th century, Cashew developed as plantations across Africa, Asia and Latin America. (Ibid) In 1970’s Mozambique was the largest producer of raw cashew nuts with enough processing capacity. Under the plight of recurrent wars and resulting decline in standard of living, the country enters into a structural adjustment policy in 1987 with IMF and World Bank in return for aid. By 1990’s the said SAP, liberalises the cashew sector, shuts down processing factories and reduces tariff on raw nuts. Whereas, in the case of India, from 1980’s, we see a gradual increase in the dependence on imported raw cashew nuts, especially from Africa, which escalates post the liberalisation of economy in 1991. Currently, the majority of processing units in India are dependent on imported raw cashew nuts from Ivory Coast, Benin, Tanzania, Guinea Bissau, Ghana, Indonesia, Nigeria and Mozambique. Hence, the raw cashews from Africa, processed in India and salted in the west, manifests today as the panacea for hungry vegans of the western world.

In this vast galaxy of this cashew global value system is the 3500-acre cashew farms in Aralam, in the district of Kannur, in Kerala. Kerala has historically been an important centre of both agricultural production of cashew (mostly located in the Malabar hilly regions) and its



processing (predominantly Kollam which is known as the “cashew capital of the world”. K.N. Harilal divides cultivation of cashew in Kerala, into individual smallholders, plantations and cultivation on protected forest land. However, the majority of cashew cultivation in the state is still run dominantly under the influence of upper caste families who inherited the farms from generations, some since the trade of opium under British rule. The locals call them “cashew kings”. While both the production and processing of cashew has historically employed workers belonging to lower castes, predominantly women from these sections, the economy has also seen radical political movement against both local and world political actors. From 1940’ the trade unions and farmers movements in the state had ensured minimum wage, bonus act, illegalisation of clandestine household processing as well as dethroning of the diwan of Travancore in Punnapra Vayalar protests. This has also led the capital to flee to nearby states for cheaper labour and relaxed labour laws, and it is under the onset of such a history that we locate Aralam Farms.

The case of Aralam Farms

Aralam Farm was a region sprawling over 12,500 acres of forest lands which were under the hands of landlords who once migrated to this region from other parts of Kerala. The areas covered the ancestral houses of Paniyars and Kurichiyars tribal groups. In 1948, the 5000-acre land adjacent to the farm was declared as forest area. The period 1950-1960 saw a large scale non-tribal migration to various parts of this region from different parts of Kerala, mainly in search of employment opportunities. Under the Kerala Private Forests (vesting and assignment) act of 1971, the forest lands bordering Kannur district in Kerala and Coorg in Karnataka were taken over the central government. The farms were jointly owned by the State Farms Corporation of India Limited and National Seeds Corporation and during this time 600 tribal families worked on the farm.

The farms fall under the evergreen and deciduous forest area spanning 55sq kms on the western slope of the Western Ghats. The annual rainfall falls below 4000mm. By 1990’s the farm turned out to be an unprofitable venture and hundreds of tribal workers died due to famine. This led the tribal groups to launch a 48 day protest followed by Muthanga struggle for acquiring land. This resulted in the state government buying the 7000-acre lands of the farm for 42 crores. This was purchased under the Tribal Sub Plan (TSP) fund. The resettlement project started with effect from 2006, and nearly 3500 landless tribal families were resettled at Aralam farm, making it one among the largest resettlement projects in Asia. Further, the Tribal Resettlement and Development Mission (TRDM) was constituted for the welfare of tribal people under the agreement between Government and the Tribal Dalit Samithi. Out of the 7000 acres, 3500 acres were given as “*pattika*” to people belonging to tribal communities from Kannur and Wayanad, along with employment in the farm for one person from the family. The rest 3500 acres cultivates cashew, aracanut, coconut, rubber, cocoa and black pepper, under the state government owned- Aralam Farming corporation. Currently the farm employs 350 workers and 10 staff members. The farms fall under Peravoor municipality with the settlement

area falling 21 km from the wildlife sanctuary. (fig 1)



1) Aralam Farm 2) Aralam Tribal Resettlement 3) Aralam Wildlife Sanctuary

Research Objectives and Questions

Objective 1: To understand the situation of tribal agricultural workers of Aralam Farms.

Question 1: What are the different issues faced by the tribal agricultural workers of Aralam?

Objective 2: To understand the situation of Aralam in the context of GVS of cashew economy.

Question 2: How are the problems faced by Aralam Agricultural workers related to Cashew GVS?

Research Methodology

The study was conducted as a part of the researcher's PhD thesis to understand social reproduction in the Cashew GVS. Aralam cashew farm is a vital case study under the said research. The sample for the study was chosen randomly from Aralam Farms and Nursery. 12 farmers, 1 security officer, 2 staff members as well as representatives of different trade unions were approached for the study. Local cashew contractors who buy from Aralam as well as other independent farmers in Kannur were also interviewed.

The study employs in-depth semi-structured interviews, time use surveys, focus group discussions as well as observations from the workplace and protest sites of the agricultural workers. The author also visited the Principal Agricultural Officer of Kannur to obtain area of cultivation of cashew in Kannur. During the author's visit the farm workers were protesting the lack of disbursement of wages for the last 7 months, along with recurrent attacks of wild elephants in the farm, which made both access to the farm and its workers difficult. Hence, the author reflects that further visits to the farm would be required to expand the study. The in-depth interviews helped in not just understanding the profile of the workers but also to understand the plethora of problems faced by the farmers. The time use survey, even though was done to



understand the question of social reproduction, revealed the differentiated impact of the system on different workers. The focus group discussions with trade union representatives helped to not just understand the immediate problems but also the history of the farm and its people. All ethical procedures and permissions have been sought from the participants for the study.

Analysis

The author visited the farms during the month of May in 2023, which is the season for harvesting the cashew nuts. A day prior, the farm was attacked by wild animals and the damages were visible along the way. In fact, they have not been able to collect this year's yield effectively due to these recurrent attacks. The farms are fenced, however the settlement which is only 21kms from the forests are not. This also means that they are not able to grow livestock or store food in their houses. Women respondents revealed in the time use survey that all the households in the settlement do not store raw or cooked food in the fear of elephants and monkeys who have previously even damaged houses and killed people in search of food. This means that the women agri-workers are forced to cook multiple times a day adding to their burden of unpaid labour. The animal attacks have intensified over the last 10 years owing to climate change and inability of the animals to find food in the forests. Moly, a farm worker faced an animal attack when a shed attacked by the animal fell on her and others. She suffered serious injuries to her head and was given Rs 8000 for treatment. Sheeba, another farm worker states that – ***“10-12 people have been killed in my neighbourhood by elephants. We are not even able to grow a single chilly plant in front of our house as the animals destroy it before it grows leaves.”***

The workers were on the 43rd day of protest demanding protection from wild animals, as well as disbursement of wages, which has not been paid for the last 7 months. The protests are jointly led by CITU, INTUC and AITUC. The hinderance to collect the nut in fear of animals is one reason. The second reason is the economic loss the farm is running under, since last 10 years in its fight with African imported cashew nuts. At Aralam a tender is sort for the sale of cashews. The price of Cashew in Kerala is still regulated to a great extent by the local cashew kings. They, in partnership with cashew contractors have set up vibrant network with contractors in Ivory Coast, Benin, Tanzania, Guinea Bissau, Ghana, Indonesia, Nigeria and Mozambique, which aid them to regulate the price of locally produced cashew nuts. The workers as well as the contractors in Kannur vouch for the superior quality of the Aralam Variety of Cashew nut owing to its physical production conditions. Thomas, a small contractor who runs a tiny shop at Chelar and resells to Kannur town accounts that- ***“The average cost of 1kg of raw cashew nut is Rs 150. This year in peak season when the local cashew plants (not the grafted plants) flourish, which is harvested in May- June, the costs were Rs 116. After the summer rains the costs have plummeted to Rs 80. The nut shows discolouration and tiny black spots from the rain, even though it does not affect the quality or nutrition of the cashew nut. But the people abroad demand white unbroken nuts. So the nuts then have to be sold for half the price.”*** Several times state government has tried to regulate the prices of cashew, but these have fallen short in front of the power and consent manufactured by the cashew kings. Narayanan, a big contractor in Kollam who exclusively sell to the big leagues, and whose family used to process cashews and grow opium during the British regime says that- ***“We usually only buy from Malabar that too only 4-5 % of what we sell in January- February. By march the cashews from Africa are harvested till September, then for the rest of the year***



load comes from Indonesia and Tanzania. I myself go to these countries to inspect the product so that the best quality of cashews I can deliver to my customers.” He supplies to two of the major cashew kings of Kollam, KGN company and Western India cashew company, both of whom are in the business for generations. During covid the state government asked the government co-operatives in Kollam to procure the cashews from Kannur. However, the quantity of local production of raw cashew nuts does not stand a chance to the mammoth processing capacity of the state.

Among the different blocks of the farms, blocks 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 8 cultivate cashews. The nursery is located in block 8 and 30 workers are employed in the nursery. The nursery dates to the inception of the farms, and has recently undergone renovation. They graft their own seeds here which is harvested between January – February. January-June are peak harvesting months for cashew and all workers are assigned cashew work during this period. Weeding is carried out prior to this. The onset of the monsoon begins the grafting season for saplings. During this season they also fish in the three rivers Baravali, Aralam and Barapuzha which surround the farm and its forests. In the 6th block 40,000 rubber trees are grown and the workers here are the old workers who were present before the state take over of the farms. They are paid directly by the plantation corporation a monthly sum of Rs 15,000 and they are counted as regular workers who enjoy pension. Mathew, a farm farmer in Aralam farms as well as a representative of INTUC states that – ***“The wages when I joined were Rs 175 a day. In 2015 it was raised to Rs 340 with 50 Rs as TA. In 2021 it was raised to Rs 450 a day.”*** Ramachandran, his colleague and a representative of CITU says that- ***“The problem is that 187 workers out of the total 350 are still on casual employment and are paid a daily wage. 110 out these 167 casual workers have been workers of the farm since 2010. In order to qualify for muster the worker needs to complete 240 working days in a year. 112 workers of the 187 have completed 240 working days, yet haven’t been given muster. While the regular workers get a monthly pay of Rs 25,000, the daily wage workers are paid Rs 450 a day along with a TA of Rs 50”***. The regular workers avail pension at 12 % whereas the daily wage workers avail it at 8.33%. Neither worker avail medical benefits which is restricted only to office staff of the farms. Casual workers get no TA or the dearness allowance of Rs 8000 paid at the end of the year. The agricultural workers report to work at 8am, have two 15 min tea breaks and 45 minutes lunch and leave for home between 4pm-5pm. Sunday is leave without pay.

70 Percent of the regular workers are tribals who live in the resettlement area in the farms. 30 percent remain old employees of State Farms corporation of India ltd. The Aralam settler farm workers belong to the communities of Paniyas, Kurimalars, Karimbalars, Mavilan and Kurachiyars. A small minority are also Christians. Some of the spouses of the farm workers work as security guards, drivers for the truck which transports the workers from their houses to the farm and carry out other minor tasks around the farm. When they have no work, they go to work in the plantations of nearby of independent farmers and women workers also work as domestic workers in houses of people living in surrounding regions. All the workers interviewed were educated between 7th std to 10th std. The task of the farm worker includes digging holes in the ground for the plants, irrigation, weeding, harvesting, grafting, looking after the farm dog as well as loading and unloading the products and raw materials. The work of the 23 security guards is not just to keep intruders away but to chase elephants, monkeys and pigs with crackers. In fact, 2 workers when asked what safety apparatus they were provided answered crackers.



The workers are provided with grafting knife, spade, sheers, rubber baskets, plastic baskets, hand shovel, sickle, stem cutter, sprayers, roscan irrigator, pickaxe and sacks. Only the weeding knife is brought by the worker. Every block has a supervisor who allots the work of the day and joins in the farming. One such supervisor identifies air gun and crackers as his tools. Safety equipment available are gloves, masks and shoes. 2 trucks pick up the workers from the settlement area and these are neither sufficient for the number of workers and they have to travel in crowded vehicles and further, these have no cover in the rains. Sali, a 58-year-old worker says that the truck is older than her.

These issues need to be understood in the context of not just the immediate world political economy of cashew production but also the history of cashew GVS. It has already been discussed, how the prices of cashew produced in Aralam is regulated by local cashew kings with the help of companies and contractors across the globe. This helps them in keeping the prices of raw cashew nuts low as well as discourage farmers from producing raw cashew. Such a differentiation of production wherein countries including but not limited to Ivory Coast, Benin, Tanzania, Guinea Bissau, Ghana, Indonesia, Nigeria and Mozambique are forced to restrict themselves to production of raw cashew nut, India to processing imported nuts and value addition to the west. Depending on the country the value addition is re-designed, such as the wasabi flavoured cashew nuts in Japan. The demand from the west determine the size, colour and nature of cashew nut being produced when the fact of the matter remain that the western countries are not only under-skilled for the production of cashewnut but also incapable, subject to their environmental conditions. (Patnaik)

The lands belonging to Kurumar, Kurichiyar and Malarayar, who were mainly depended on agriculture for their livelihood were attacked by the local kings. They took over the tribal land and put the Nair community incharge of it. They split the land into different parts and granted janmis the right to collect tax. In addition to this, they demarcated the entire land into devaswom and janmana land. The land under the control of the janmis was leased out to private individuals. Kanam- kuzhikanam (tenant owner of the land subject to payment along with interest on produces from the land), pettupattam, munpattam, panayam, cherathu and otti (tenants need to pay security on land to the landlord) were some of the land use policies. This is how the Nair section in the society became the owners of land (Mathew, 2011). On the other hand, those in the lower sections of the society, especially the tribals ended up as mere laborers or tenants, or were pushed into the forests. The tribals of Malabar, who earlier used to practice agriculture were employed as slaves in this expropriated land. For instance, the Paniya and Adiya sections were sold and bought in the Valiyyurkavu area in Wayanad. This forms the first stage of tribal land acquisition and resulting alienation.

Further, large scale migration of Christians and Ezhavas happened post 1865, when the farmers of Thiruvithamkoor learned that an acre of land which costs Rs 150-200 in Thiruvithamkoor, costs only Rs 5-6 in Wayanad. They migrated to the hilly regions of Malabar and enmassed 12-15 acres of land. The British expeditions of scientific forestry and resulting large scale plantations as well as forest laws, snatched away resort and access to forest for tribals, forming the second stage of tribal land alienation. Consequently, forest which covered over 85% in 1905 was reduced to a mere 34% by 1973. (Kumar, N)



Prasad (2011) writes that *“the settlement of agricultural people in forests is not a process of adjustment, but a process of exploitation and marginalisation”*. In other words, through various accumulation regimes, the marginalisation of people belonging to tribal community was not only profitable, but also vital for capital. The acquisition was not just of the land but also of the means of production. Be it the agricultural lands or the forest lands, the expropriation is not only material but also of the production relations wherein they were dependent on the forests for their livelihood. This requires us to reflect on not just the expropriation from lived land but also the manner in which different groups are assimilated into larger political economy.

Recent Developments

Since the author’s visit in May of 2023, the government has started a project called the “elephant wall” in the area between the settlement and the forests. Further a task force has been constituted with state actors, forest officers and skilled experts to prevent wild elephant encroachment into the settlement.

Conclusion

The study attempted to look at the historical transition in the changing relations between nature, labour and life of tribal people and capital. It understands that the exploitation of tribal workers of Aralam date back to expropriation of land, first by local kings and upper caste Hindus and secondly by forest laws and scientific forestry policies of British colonisers. Under finance capital, these workers are caught in the stranglehold of competitive capital, unable to sell their crop for a fair income. Historically this has led to not just an attack on their production relations but also assimilated them into the larger political economy in a way where their exploitation results in profit for capitalists. Cashew then remains a rich man’s food and a poor man’s crop. While projects such as Aralam attempt to alleviate the exploitation face by tribal people over generations, a decent life is further away, and justice, even further.