Labour, Livelihoods & Political Narratives: A Study of Social Structures, Globalisation & Development in the Coconut Economy of Kerala

by

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LABOUR, LIVELIHOODS & POLITICAL NARRATIVES:
A STUDY OF SOCIAL STRUCTURES, GLOBALISATION & DEVELOPMENT IN THE COCONUT ECONOMY OF KERALA

Terah Sportel
University of Guelph, 2013

The research is part of a larger study that seeks to examine the manifestations and influences of globalisation and liberalisation on the rural economy and rural livelihoods in different parts of India. The work contributes to this overarching objective through its focus on the coconut economy in the south Indian state of Kerala, the country’s main coconut producer. This economy has experienced various market changes after India’s agricultural liberalisation in the mid-1990s. Indeed, the Government of Kerala has indicated these changes, including increasing imports of palm oil and new trade agreements, have led to a crisis; an issue of considerable importance to the state economy and farmers’ livelihoods. More recent government explanations for the crisis include a labour shortage; particularly an inadequate supply of coconut pluckers. The dissertation takes this ‘crisis’ as its starting point.

Through detailed ethnographic, comparative case study of two distinct regions, the research provides a more comprehensive view of change within the coconut economy. More generally, the research furthers understanding of uneven agricultural development and wider processes of agrarian change. The research explores issues at the macro-, meso- and micro-scale. This allows for elucidation of key aspects of change beyond those derived from current neoclassical, macro-level studies. Weaving the work together is the recognition that geography, history and political-economy of a region, and the mediating role of social structures, have important implications for the manifestations of globalisation on livelihoods in rural economies. The research, presented as three articles, makes important empirical and scholarly contributions through: (1) a nuanced, spatially disaggregated explanation of the changes in the coconut economy that beyond the common macro-level and sectoral analyses; (2) a structure-and-agency understanding of the relationship between coconut market change and the agricultural labour market; (3) a regional comparison of livelihood dynamics and the ways in which they are spatially structured; and (4) scholarly contributions to development, labour geography and livelihoods studies.
Dedication

For my parents, whose love and support are immeasurable.
Acknowledgements

Foremost, recognition is due to the people in Kerala who made this work possible through their participation and knowledge. Our ‘rum plucker’ is noteworthy for his enthusiastic discussions and matchbox *komban chelli* (dynastinae). Chechi (aka Aishwarya Rai) and family transcended cultural boundaries, provided a home and friendship. JJ’s time and insights are pivotal to the research. His family’s hospitality and *karimeen* (*Etroplus suratensis*) feast are cherished. To my family near the temple junction, thank-you.

The dedication, distance travelled and Malayalam language ‘calisthenics’ of Jithin Raj are invaluable for the depth of research achieved. His spontaneity and stories from the ‘every day’ provided a welcome way to ‘time pass’. Research assistance from Dhanuja, Deepu, Kichan and Raji facilitated initial study and household survey completion. Sara’s meticulous Malayalam-English translations of panchayat documents are important contributions. The Centre for Development Studies, Trivandrum provided a welcome entry to the research and valuable logistical support. Soman Nair’s assistance was particularly helpful and conversations enjoyable.

In the Global North, I am grateful for René Véron’s enduring support, intellectual contributions and enthusiasm for extensive research. My doctoral committee, Craig Johnson Alice Hovorka, went above and beyond their call. I appreciate their guidance and editorial contributions. I am thankful for the participation of, and intelligent questions put forth by Peter Vandergeest and Evan Fraser in my doctoral defence. Peter provided important suggestions for revision. John Smithers, Richard Khun, Ben Bradshaw and Noella Gray deserve special mention for their support. Team India (Ashley McClelland, Nicole Latulippe and Ananya Majumder) and its forefather (Garry Fehr) are amazing compatriots. I could not ask for a better cohort; Shauna Bloom, Gift Dumedah, Tom Lusis and Irene Delgado-Fernandez enlivened my time in Hutt and contributed to memorable adventures.

Beyond Guelph, Margaret Walton-Roberts has provided consistent encouragement of my work and an infusion of humour. Simon Chivers’ wit and friendship have been invaluable. Pippi’s ability to summarize the importance of coconuts and her marvellous self are irreplaceable; appreciated is her suggestion for the opening sentence ‘This is coconut: labour in Kerala.’ I am grateful for Jason Venkiteswaran’s perseverance and time; his technical savvy made quality maps and sleek typesetting feasible.

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The real cause of development of the west coast was the coconut . . . .

The coconut, now to be found in every Indian ceremony and ritual, was rather poorly known in many parts of India before the sixth century A.D. This provides a useful comment upon ‘timeless and immutable’ Indian customs. The wood, fibre, wine, and other products of this tree are also of the utmost value; the nut itself provides ‘meat’ for cooking and when dried an excellent food oil, used also for soap-making. The western coastal strip . . . could not have been profitably cleared of its dense forest, let alone settled with its present crowded population, without this tree and the heavy commodity production based upon its exploitation in full.

Kosambi (2008, p. 189)
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Introduction

1.1 Problem context

The research herein is part of a larger study that seeks to examine the manifestations and influences of globalisation and liberalisation on the rural economy and livelihoods in different parts of India. The work contributes to this overarching objective through its focus on the coconut economy in the south Indian state of Kerala, the country’s main coconut producer (KSPB, 2012). This economy has experienced various market changes after India’s agricultural liberalisation in the mid-1990s. According to the Government of Kerala (2003a) these changes, including increasing imports of palm oil, have led to a crisis.

Recent concern has been expressed about increasing vulnerabilities to the local economy through expanding trade agreements with other coconut growing countries in South Asia (Harilal, 2010). Further, a labour shortage of coconut pluckers has been identified as an important policy focus (CACP, 2010; CACP, 2011; KSPB, 2012). These issues are argued to be critical to the sustainability of coconut production and processing in the state (Government of Kerala, 2003a; Harilal, 2010). The governments of India and Kerala indicate that the crisis is of considerable importance to the state economy and the livelihoods of up to 3.5 million farmer families (CACP, 2007; KSPB, 2004). Yet studies on changes within the coconut economy have been primarily based on a neoclassical macroeconomic approach through sectoral analysis (Lathika and Kumar, 2009; Narayana et al., 2006, 2001; Varma, 2004).

Without local level empirical studies, questions remain about the ways in which people are experiencing this ‘crisis’. Is it a liberalisation-induced crisis, and do people perceive it as such? If there is a ‘crisis’, would other coconut-
based livelihoods (traders, processors, labourers) not be affected? Why is there a labour shortage, and is it related to changes within the coconut economy? Are livelihoods equally vulnerable between social groups and across Kerala? The research explores these questions through an approach that frames the study at different scales (macro, meso and micro). This allows for the elucidation of key processes of change beyond the current macro-level studies. Empirical and theoretical contributions are made while working toward a more comprehensive understanding of coconut market and livelihood change.

1.2 Research aim and objectives

The overarching aim of the research is to examine the manifestations and influences of agricultural liberalisation on livelihoods within the rural coconut economy of Kerala, India.

The research objectives are as follows:

1. Develop a more comprehensive, nuanced and spatially disaggregated explanation of the changes in the coconut economy that go beyond the common macro-level and sectoral analysis (Chapters 2 & 4).

2. Understand the relationship between change within the coconut economy and the agricultural labour market through an analysis of structure and agency (Chapter 3).

3. Explore regional variation of livelihood dynamics within the coconut economy (Chapter 4).

4. Contribute theoretically to the study of development narratives and labour geography (Chapters 2 & 3).

1.3 Framing the research through social structures

The work draws upon interdisciplinary literature, but remains grounded in the discipline of geography. The research is situated within development, political science, political economy, labour geography and livelihoods. While drawing from various literatures, its focus on social structures through a geographic, political-economic and historical approach weaves the material together. Arguably, structure is one of the least well defined words in academic scholarship and thus requires clarification on what it is, how it is produced and the ways it may change. In general terms structure is the reproduction of the way things are; it is anything that reproduces the way of doing things. Arguably everything is structured in some way and everything has a relationship to something else. However structure differs from notions of ‘context’
in that it places emphasis on dominant social relations and the inequalities they produce.

In tandem with this more general understanding, Harriss-White’s (2003) version of the social structures of accumulation (SSA) approach (originally developed by Gordon et al. (1982)) is a useful way to frame a local-level analysis of the Indian economy. The research draws from this approach generally, and explicitly in the analysis of unorganised labour market regulation (Chapter 3). The SSA centres on social institutions that shape the accumulation process (i.e. assembling factors of production and converting the results into wealth). For example a plucker is accumulating capital through their wage. Yet the coconut producer/trader is also accumulating, and they do so through coconut production/processing and are able to accumulate more. Important is the question of how structures ensure or undermine stability through shaping both class conflicts and conflicts between competing concentrations of capital. The approach does not provide a hierarchical list of key institutions, but recognises that some institutions are always seen to be involved, particularly those that structure the relations between labour and management (e.g. caste, class, gender Harriss-White, 2003).

In order for transfers of wealth to occur, people have to believe in what they are doing; there is something that keeps people doing it and most people may derive reasons to justify their actions. For example, a plucker may know they are being exploited but will justify this exploitation by rationalising that they are doing it for their family, and thus legitimising this exploitation to themselves. Caste discourses form something of a social law and establish which community groups labour in particular types of work. This discourse needs to be continuously affirmed and renewed for accumulation to take place. Accumulation does not happen automatically, it requires people to work, but they do not only work knowing they are exploited, they have a certain caste identity associated with this work. For example, individuals who have these ideas in their heads are acting in their different way. When viewed as a collective certain patterns and trends emerge and some structures become more dominant than others. To understand structure it is thus important to consider ideology and the ways in which it shapes social action.

Yet structure is not a ‘solid box’ within which an agent sits, nor is it impenetrable to change; it is something more flexible and better conceived of as an arrangement. A particular community or group of agents can act in a certain way to transform what they are doing, but it may not necessarily change the relationship they have to other people. For example, pluckers may demand higher wages but they are still in a wage relation to an employer, or they may have opportunities outside of agriculture but only retain marginal landholdings. Therefore if you believe in caste ideology, and you act in the way you should, then you will not change your economic situation. But if you challenge this structure then you have some agency. Katz (2004) and
Scott (1985) show that in challenging these structures, or challenging the way things are done, is an expression of agency. Therefore, agency can only be understood by providing attention to structure. It is for this reason that the research is framed by such an approach.

1.4 Methodology

Fieldwork is at once a political, personal, and professional undertaking. It provides crucial reference points and evidence upon which knowledge claims are made. Careful consideration, though, is required of one’s own assumptions about the field . . .

Hyndman (2001, p. 262)

The research takes the coconut ‘crisis’ as its starting point, and explores political, economic and social change through careful research design in two regions in Kerala. At the heart of the research is extensive, ethnographic study conducted over 1.5 years of fieldwork while living in the studied panchayats (two extended field trips in 2007 and 2008, two short revisits in 2009 and 2010). Common to ethnographic study, the work was grounded in a commitment to first-hand experience and exploration, including participant observation, interviews and transect walks (Atkinson et al., 2001). Throughout the research process effort to be socially situated was central to the research. This required knowledge of regional history, culture and social issues (see Jensen and Glasmeier, 2010). The duration of fieldwork reflects a qualitative approach grounded in relationships, one that sought to ‘yield significant insights into the peoples, places, interactions, and meanings that are constructed in and through the sight of the case study’ (DeLyser, 2010, p. 24).

The research is designed as a comparative case study of two locations to pursue an in-depth understanding of regional variation in coconut market change; an approach chosen for its ability to provide ‘deep, concrete explanations of social phenomenon that are attentive to a variety of contextual influences at various scales’ (Baxter, 2010, p. 95). Prior to selecting the research locations it was determined that centring the study in two different regions in Kerala would be important to explore possible differences in coconut market and livelihood change. Thiruvananthapuram and Palakkad Districts were selected for their varied geography (ecology, terrain, physical location) and political-economic history (see Section 3.7). For this reason the fieldwork centred on two gram panchayats (local political-administrative units covering one or more villages) in two different taluks (sub-districts), one each in Chirayinkeezhu Taluk, Thiruvananthapuram District and Chittur Taluk, Palakkad District. The Centre for Development Studies, Thiruvananthapuram
were consulted, and brief tours, observations and informal discussions with government officials and community members were used to choose appropriate study panchayats. Prior to commencing in-depth study the panchayat president was consulted and approval granted.

Keeping with the ethnographic tradition accommodations were sought within each study panchayat. This living arrangement strengthened opportunities for first hand experience living, marketing and working within the community. In Thiruvananthapuram a rental house was chosen adjacent to one of the main junctions. One research assistant from Thiruvananthapuram city shared the home and the accommodations acted as the primary gathering place for the research team. In Thiruvananthapuram working closely with local research assistants allowed for increased familiarity with their friends and families. Jithin’s status within the community was useful for facilitating discussions and interactions with a variety of people. Particularly important for deriving a deeper understanding of social interactions was his honesty when translating, his patience and genuine interest in the research and bridging cultural differences and assumptions. Thiruvananthapuram, was at times, a challenging location to conduct research as a foreigner because of its proximity to a popular beach tourism destination, and the types of interactions that occur there.

In Palakkad panchayat it was possible to rent the front portion of a home with the owner and their family living in the back half. Over time we became close to this family and the connecting door between our sections of the home was primarily open. We shared meals, shared kitchens, enjoyed celebrations together, travelled, engaged in long discussions, shared in the tragic suicide of a family member, battled snakes and more generally experienced the ‘every day’ together. We also became close with one of the larger coconut traders in the community, engaging in long and frank discussions about his business and the coconut market, and enjoying celebrations of his children’s birthdays. He also facilitated connections to traders and brokers outside the panchayat. In many respects it was easier to live in Palakkad for its rural character and distance from foreign tourism. However initial access to key interview respondents and deeper engagement took a bit more time and perseverance. This was partly because we were outsiders, and more particularly because of community caste relations. For example, traders’ stronger control over many of the pluckers’ labour time, in tandem with their perceptions of self-worth, led to challenges accessing in-depth interviews. Furthermore, traders were not always as forthcoming as those in Thiruvananthapuram.

Additional study was conducted in other areas of Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Briefer visits in rural parts of Kollam District, in the city of Kochi, Ernakulam District and in the town of Irinjalakuda and its surrounding villages in Thrissur District, and the town of Kangeyam, Erode District, Tamil Nadu (Figure 1.1) were important contributions to the work. These locations were
included in the study because of their role in coconut processing and trade. Some interviews were initiated through key informants in the study panchayats. Snowball sampling was an important research method for triangulation and gaining access to some respondents, particularly traders.

Figure 1.1: Map of research locations in Kerala and Tamil Nadu, India.

Conducting comparative research within the two regions necessitated consistent research methods. The field study mainly comprised two approaches: open-ended and semi-structured interviews \( (n = 140) \) and household surveys \( (n = 569 \text{ households}, n = 2,711 \text{ individuals: 1353 male, 1358 female}) \). To obtain a multifaceted understanding of changes within the coconut economy and ensure triangulation, interviews with a variety of people were sought, including farmers, traders, processors, pluckers, toddy tappers, gen-
eral agricultural labourers, academics and government officials (Table 1.1; Appendix A, interview guide). Respondents were provided ‘space’ to discuss additional aspects of their lives, while employing sensitivity. The in-depth semi-structured interviews lasted between one-and-a-half and two hours and were conducted in Malayalam, with some conducted in Tamil and English. Local research assistants were invaluable to the fieldwork. They provided assistance with data collection, language translation and intercultural understanding. Transcriptions were made in the recorded language and translated through a collaborative process. Direct transcriptions of recorded interviews were useful for a nuanced understanding. In contrast, if point form were taken, or interviews only translated in the field, much of the depth obtained herein would be absent; direct quotations give strength to people’s voices. Diverse observations (e.g. household details, data uncertainty, social interactions, challenging situations) were recorded.

The household survey was used to capture the complexity of local livelihoods (see Appendix B, survey schedule). It was designed to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. Household- and individual-level data were collected and analysed. The ‘household’ included residents outside the immediate social unit to account for spatially dispersed contributors to household welfare (see Bruce and Lloyd, 1997). This is particularly important in Kerala, since approximately 18.2% of the households comprise at least one emigrant, and remittances are an important livelihood source (Zachariah and Rajan, 2012). While there are between 15-20 wards in each panchayat, the study was limited to just a few. The survey was administered with the help of research assistants in six wards, three within each panchayat.

Initial details on the panchayat and particular wards were derived from discussions with local government officials and local people. A tour of each panchayat was conducted through a combination of transect walks and motorcycle. The surveyed wards were chosen to reflect the social and economic characteristics of each location and to capture the various livelihood strategies in (but not limited to) coconut production, processing and trade. For example, one ward containing a Scheduled Caste colony was selected from each panchayat. This was to ensure that agricultural labourers would be adequately represented. The other two wards in each panchayat were chosen to reflect livelihood activities within the wider panchayat, and to capture a combination of coconut producers, traders and processors. The survey was pre-tested in alternative wards in each panchayat ($n = 10$) to ensure integrity in its design. Prior to conducting the survey, the original design was revised and more detail added to the coconut-based livelihoods section.
Table 1.1: Semi-structured interview respondents by key livelihood activity and district in Kerala and Tamil Nadu, India.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Thiruvananthapuram</th>
<th>Palakkad</th>
<th>Ernakulam</th>
<th>Allepuzha</th>
<th>Quilon</th>
<th>Thrissur</th>
<th>Kangeyam</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trader</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coconut producer</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>16</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plucker</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other coconut labour</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toddy tapper</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government official</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Other experts</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td></td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Coir processing</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fisherman</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tea shop owner</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sand-mining labour</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>50</strong></td>
<td><strong>75</strong></td>
<td><strong>4</strong></td>
<td><strong>1</strong></td>
<td><strong>4</strong></td>
<td><strong>2</strong></td>
<td><strong>4</strong></td>
<td><strong>140</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

∞
Data collection was based on a stratified random sample. Attempt was made to survey every third household, however this was not always possible. At times, household members would refuse to participate or they were not found at home. For those households wherein members were unreachable, three separate attempts were made to conduct the survey. If a household did not participate in the survey, the adjacent household was included instead. The sample population (17–21%) achieved is 60% of the initially anticipated 33%. To determine the actual number of households per ward proved challenging because: (1) available data is outdated (2001 census); (2) data includes additional buildings with household numbers (e.g. shed) (3) some ward boundaries changed prior to the 2004 state election; and (4) an accurate map of the panchayat is not available. Possibly some areas of the ward were missed because it was at times difficult, even through consultation with local people, to reach all households and accurately confirm ward boundaries.

Table 1.2: Number of surveyed households by community group in Thiruvananthapuram and Palakkad panchayats, Kerala, India.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Thiruvananthapuram</th>
<th>Palakkad</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General Caste (Hindu)</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nair</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pillai</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Backward Classes</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ezhava</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scheduled Castes</td>
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<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thandan</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kuruvan</td>
<td>28</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scheduled Tribes</td>
<td>32</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total households</td>
<td>269</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Diverse community groups by caste, class and religion (Hindu, Muslim, Christian) are represented (Table 1.2). The data captures a larger number of Scheduled Caste households (Thiruvananthapuram: 15%; Palakkad: 24%) than the actual proportion recorded for each panchayat. This is likely related to the explicit inclusion of one ward with a Scheduled Caste colony (while only choosing two others) to ensure representation of agricultural labourers. Decent representation of community groups by religion was achieved. At

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3The proportion of Scheduled Castes recorded in the 1991 Census of India was 10% in Thiruvananthapuram panchayat and 15% in Palakkad panchayat. Recent data on the proportion of community groups within each panchayat is inaccessible. However, the district-wise data from the 2011 Census of India shows a similar proportion of Scheduled Castes in rural Thiruvananthapuram (12%), Palakkad (15%) and Kerala (8.5%).
times discussions moved beyond the survey questions, and these ‘spontaneous’ interviews recorded. The interviews provide richer detail on people’s livelihood activities, change and vulnerability and helped triangulate survey responses.

The breadth of data collected was possible through flexibility, patience and time in the field. The ability to ask critical questions and form a deeper understanding of agrarian change necessitated an approach informed by knowledge of the geography and political, economic and social history of Kerala. A collaborative process with research assistants and respondents, while living and working in the study regions was central to the case studies. This situated engagement allowed for richer understanding of change within the coconut industry. In this way, among others, ethnography was central to the work; an approach in which ‘the relationships of researcher and researched, insider and outsider, self and other, body and environment, and field and home are negotiated’ (Watson and Till, 2010, p. 121). In light of this approach, and to provide context for the remaining chapters, the following section provides some background on the social and economic development of the state of Kerala. This is followed by an introductory section on coconut production and the labour process, with particular emphasis on plucking (see Chapters 3 and 4 for further discussion).

1.5 Social development in Kerala: In brief outline

Prior to Kerala state formation (1956), the territory comprised the states of Travancore–Cochin (central and south Kerala) and Malabar (north Kerala). Erstwhile Travancore was a princely state under indirect control by the British through treaties until Indian Independence (1947) (Menon, 2003). While Malabar District was within the Madras Presidency (provincial administrative division) and under direct control of the British. The agrarian structure varied regionally, with the paddy regions of South Malabar characterised by greater insecurity and inequality in land tenure, while there was freer labour in Travancore (see Herring, 1983, pp. 153–179; Nair and Adoor, 1986; Varghese, 1970). Early social reforms and investment in education and infrastructure were carried out in Travancore, including a Proclamation legally abolishing slavery (1854). Here the majority of cultivated and cultivable lands were under state ownership, and owner-cultivators comprised the largest agrarian class. This facilitated land reforms (1865) under the support of the Raja (king) of Travancore. Land became a marketable asset, with capitalism infiltrating agriculture earlier and more deeply than elsewhere. In Malabar British policies strengthened landlord control and feudal relations where landless labourers and tenants formed the largest agrarian classes (Herring, 1983, pp. 153–179; Nair and Adoor, 1986; Varghese, 1970).

In contemporary times, the emergence of the communist movement in
Travancore was particularly important for Kerala’s development path. The state has a distinct history of trade union militancy and participation within India (see Justino, 2006). Kerala’s government pursued a radical, leftist policy including far-reaching land reforms, large-scale public expenditures for education and health, and a system of redistribution of resources (Franke and Chasin, 1994). The state is comparatively unique within the Indian union for its high social development with indicators (e.g. high literacy rate, low birth/death rates, strong sex ratio) comparative to countries in the Global North. For this reason it has been denoted a ‘model of development’ by numerous scholars (e.g. Amin, 1991; Centre for Development Studies, 1977; Franke and Chasin, 1994; Parayil, 2000; Ramachandran, 1997; Ratcliffe, 1978). Particularly important are state land reforms (1970). These reforms resulted in the redistribution of land to tenants/cultivators and legislated ceilings on landholdings (10-20 acres/family and 6-7 acres/person).

However the ‘model’ has also been critiqued, primarily for its limited achievements in economic growth through local production and uneven development across the state and between community groups (e.g. George, 1993; Oommen, 1993; Prakash, 1994; Raman, 2010). Furthermore, some scholars have questioned the success of state land reforms. This is because relatively large cultivators of privileged community groups (e.g. Nairs, Christians, Muslims) received the majority of transferred land area. Some traditional landlords have been able to maintain ownership of large landholdings (e.g. 40–60 acres) by circumventing legislated ceilings through illegal property titles (see Herring, 1983; Oommen, 1971; Varghese, 1970). The actual tillers/labourers, which the land reforms claimed to support, received at most minuscule landholdings (Franke and Chasin, 1994; Herring, 1983; Oommen, 1993; Törnquist and Tharakan, 1995). Many Scheduled Caste community members (those of the original slave and agricultural labouring castes) (see Nair and Adoor, 1986) have been provided up to 4 cents of land. This allows for a small house (typically with a tiled/thatched roof) and possibly a marginal homegarden with one coconut palm. Majority of households have marginal holdings (< 2.5 acres) and cultivate small homestead gardens. Particularly in southwestern Kerala these plots are where most the coconuts are grown. While many have gained access to an important asset, these landholdings are too small to support agricultural production as a primary livelihood contribution.

1.6 Coconut production and the labour process

Kerala is the primary producer of coconut in India with 42.4% of the total production (KSPB, 2012). But production has steadily declined while it has grown in other southern states; in 1960 Kerala accounted for almost 70% of the production (Narayana et al., 2006). Between 1950–51 and 1987–88 the
productivity of coconuts declined. The increases in production during this period were directly related to increases in the area under coconut, primarily at the expense of paddy cultivation (Government of India, 2008; Narayana et al., 1991). The area under coconut reached its maximum in 2000–01, and has since continued to decline (Ecostat, 2013). While Kerala has the lowest productivity in India, coconut production remains an important contribution to people’s livelihoods, though not necessarily as a primary activity. Various challenges (e.g. marginal and fragmented landholdings, widespread disease, ageing palms, changing socio-economic aspirations, commoditisation of land, accessibility and control of labour) contribute to the declining productivity of coconut, particularly in the southwestern districts of Kerala. To understand some of these issues more clearly the following discussion provides background on coconut production and the labour process for plucking. Because of the ways in which accumulation and the workforce are socially structured, it is particularly important to understand the labour process, while exploring economic change in the coconut economy. This helps to situate the chapters that follow, providing context for the various arguments routed in the changing coconut economy of Kerala and its ‘crisis’.

Coconut is a perennial crop for commercial and subsistence use. There are two distinct varieties, tall and dwarf, which produce wide variation through cross pollination (e.g. height and colour, shape and size of coconut). The tall coconut palm is a hardy variety, growing to a height of 15–18 metres and living for 80–90 years, although productivity declines over time. Tall coconut palms commence production 6-8 years after planting. Under optimal growing conditions the average yield is 60–80 coconuts per palm per year. This palm produces coconuts particularly good for copra and coconut oil, for which Kerala is attributed with quality production. The West Coast Tall varietal is commonly grown in India, particularly on the southern coast. It is referred to as the ‘ordinary’ or traditional variety. Coconut palms have a unique seasonality whereby coconuts are produced on a predictable schedule and year-round. They mature within 12 months with new bunches (ideal for copra and coconut oil) ready for harvesting every 45-60 days according to the season. Delaying the harvest, delays new production (see Thampan, 1993). These attributes have important implications for the productivity of coconut palms and the labour process.

Coconut production is difficult to mechanise and plucking requires specialised manual labour. Manual plucking work is a male occupation which requires skill, years of training and physical ability. A skilled plucker will typically begin training as a pre-teen or teenager (12–16 years old), but may also learn the trade in his early twenties. They learn through apprenticeship and initially helping a trained plucker by loading and dehusking coconuts. Once they learn to climb the palms they also learn how maintain them (e.g. removing dead vegetation/branches, recognising and treating disease). Tra-
ditional pluckers climb trees without the aid of any climbing device but may use a tall bamboo ladder (*eanni*) (Figure 1.2). While the ladder facilitates the climb for a tall tree, the plucker still has to climb the remainder manually. They also use a coir rope as a harness while plucking at the top of the palm, and will also use it to carefully lower coconut bunches to the ground (Figure 1.3). Pluckers use a particular knife (*veatte kathi*) to cut the bunches and clean the palms. While physically demanding, pluckers at their physical peak are able to climb between 100–150 coconut palms/day.

Figure 1.2: A traditional bamboo plucking ladder resting against a coconut palm in Thiruvananthapuram panchayat, Kerala, India. The house and woman in the distance provides a sense of scale to visualise the height of the palm.

The cyclical and perennial nature of coconut production requires a labour-force in the vicinity, that can be used as and when required. Ensuring access to plucking labour requires certain incentives or bonds that control labour
Figure 1.3: A plucker uses a coir rope as a harness while climbing a coconut palm in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, India.

and regulate the workforce (Sportel, 2013). These strategies vary by region, reflecting political–historical social structures and their relations (see, for example Nair and Adoor, 1986; Oommen, 1971, 1984; Singh, 2002a; Varghese, 1970). Within Kerala many occupations are primarily structured through caste ideology. The Scheduled Castes, or the ‘untouchables’ (those considered polluting by touch or proximity), who together with the Scheduled Tribes, are the most socially excluded communities. Generally, the labour performed by a particular community reflects their social position within society. These social divisions explicitly separate agricultural labourers from other community groups, including coconut producers and processors.

Caste restrictions and the negative social connotations attached to agricultural work make it undesirable for higher caste communities (e.g. Nair,
Pillai) to labour in agriculture. Therefore, these coconut producers will hire labour to pluck coconuts, even if they only have a few palms. It is important to note that the division of land ownership, and therefore the number of coconut palms, is primarily along caste lines. A Scheduled Caste community member may have just enough homestead land to grow one coconut palm. Because they are a labouring community they will pluck their own coconuts. They may also pluck for their neighbours either without charging a wage or receiving a lower wage than average or in-kind payment of a few coconuts. Poorer community members who are physically unable to climb and pluck, nor access in-kind labour from family or neighbours, will avoid plucking. They will primarily collect coconuts that fall naturally from the palm, using them for their household.

While a variety of community groups labour as climbers, whether pluckers or toddy tappers (palm/coconut wine harvesters), these are separate occupations requiring specialised training. Some communities are traditional climbers based on their caste designation, and have passed the required skills and knowledge down through successive generations. For example, coconut climbers who labour in toddy tapping (kalle chette) are traditionally from the Ezhava community. Toddy tapping is further divided into two different types of work along ethnic lines, pande chette (Tamil tapping) and challi chette (mud tapping by Malayalees), for which different methods of tapping are used and wages received. Social divisions also exist within the Scheduled Caste community where plucking labour is drawn. For example, Traditional pluckers in Thiruvananthapuram are from the Thandan community. They are typically more skilled at plucking and perceived as more efficient pluckers compared to others within the Scheduled Caste community (e.g. Kuruvan). While many Thandans also labour in other coconut-related work, including seedling production, woodcutting and preparing coconut leaves (olla) for thatched roofs and death beds, other (unskilled) Scheduled Caste pluckers do not labour at these tasks. They generally rely on alternative wage labour (particularly during the rainy season) for their livelihoods (e.g. tilling/fertilising coconut palms or illegal sand mining).

1.7 Thesis outline

The dissertation proceeds in four chapters. The research objectives are organised into three articles. Each article is presented as a separate chapter, followed by a conclusion.

The first article\textsuperscript{4} develops a comprehensive and spatially disaggregated explanation of the changes in Kerala’s coconut economy that goes beyond the common macro-level and sectoral analysis (Chapter 2). It identifies the

political discourse of a coconut crisis as a persistent ‘narrative’. The paper addresses the first objective through two interrelated undertakings. First, the article seeks to unravel the persistent crisis narrative by deconstructing it through a content analysis of official reports. Second, the paper attempts to represent the diverse and complementary explanations by local traders and farmers that are silenced by the official discourse. It challenges the problem analysis juxtaposing it with information from ethnographic research derived through semi-structured interviews.

The second article (Sportel, 2013) follows insights derived from the first by investigating labours’ role within the changing coconut economy (Chapter 3). It combines insights from the social structures of accumulation framework (Harriss-White, 2003), and a carefully delineated understanding of agency (Katz, 2004), to provide a conceptual and empirical contribution to the field of labour geography. This framework reveals the complexity of the labour process as evinced by in-depth research, including data derived from the household survey and semi-structured interviews. The paper goes beyond the neoclassical macro-level understanding of a labour shortage by investigating the complexity of locally constituted labour dynamics in an ‘unorganised’ labour market.

While the first two articles primarily provide discussion of important issues on the macro and meso scales, the third centres on the micro scale to examine livelihood dynamics, reorientations and outcomes (Chapter 4). Although the Governments of Kerala and India indicate that the coconut ‘crisis’ has implications for up to 3.5 million farmer families, there have been no studies to this end. To explore this oversight, the final paper relies heavily on the detailed household-based survey data to explore the ways in which livelihood strategies shape and are influenced by coconut market change. The paper explores the connections between regional differences in coconut production and processing and livelihood change.

In conclusion, a summary of the primary empirical and scholarly contributions, reflection on the research process and suggestions for future study are given (Chapter 5). The chapter demonstrates the connections between the three articles, tying them together to provide insight on the manifestations and influences of agricultural liberalisation and of wider processes of change within the coconut economy of Kerala.
Coconut crisis in Kerala? Mainstream narrative & alternative perspectives

Development and Change (DECH-12-084).

This article is co-authored with René Véron and under revision with Development and Change (DECH-12-084), Coconut Crisis in Kerala? Mainstream Narrative and Alternative Perspectives. Acknowledgement of authorship is found in Appendix C.

2.1 Abstract

India’s oilseeds sector, of which the coconut economy is part, experienced drastic changes in the wake of agricultural liberalisation in the mid–1990s. A persistent coconut crisis ‘narrative’ emerged after sharp prices declines in 2000–02 in which small farmers in the state of Kerala, India’s main coconut producer, were identified as victims from the liberalised importation of cheap palm oil. This paper deconstructs this crisis narrative based on a content analysis of newspaper articles and official reports, and it challenges its problem analysis juxtaposing it with information from ethnographic research among local farmers and traders. The research indicates that local labour shortages and increased regional competition had a stronger impact on Kerala’s coconut development, which varied from region to region. Furthermore, small farmers with their diversified livelihoods did not recognize a ‘crisis’ as such. Drawing upon the ‘advocacy coalition framework’, the paper also indicates reasons for the emergence and persistence of the coconut crisis narrative and it points to complex processes of restructuring social space in the age of globalisation.
2.2 Introduction

Palm oil is a close substitute of coconut oil. As such reduction in tariffs facing import of palm oil would have direct implications for the coconut economy of India. The coconut economy of the country is now facing one of the worst crises in its recent history. Harilal (2010, p. 24)

The [coconut] business depends on palm oil imports and a lot of other things.

Coconut Oil-Copra Trader, Palakkad, 21 September 2007

We began this research as a case study to examine the manifestations and influences of globalisation and liberalisation on the rural economy and rural livelihoods in different parts of India. A part of the literature on globalisation and agriculture in India argued that trade liberalisation policies since 1991, together with declining government support and investments in the rural sector, would have caused an agrarian crisis (e.g. Patnaik, 2007, 2005; Reddy and Mishra, 2009). This literature also suggested that the edible oils sector, of which the coconut economy is part, would have been particularly strongly affected by the opening up of India’s economy: ‘Perhaps the most dramatic illustration of the impact of import liberalisation on domestic sectors in India is edible oils’ (Gulati and Narayanan, 2007, p. 228). The once protected and subsidized domestic production of edible oilseeds would have come under severe pressure from the cheap importation of substitutes, particularly palm oil from Malaysia, as import quotas were lifted and import tariffs lowered in the course of India’s agricultural trade liberalisation since 1995 (Chand et al., 2004; Shiva, 2000). As the quote at the beginning of this article indicates, this scenario was explicitly applied to the coconut sector too.

Indeed, after steady increases in area under coconut and productivity between 1960–90, coconut production in India has stagnated since 1995 (Narayana et al., 2006), and there was a sharp drop in the price of copra in 2000–02. The stagnation seems most significant in the southwestern state of Kerala, the largest coconut producer in India whose share has declined at the expense of the other southern states from 70% in 1960 (Narayana et al., 2006) to currently 42% (KSPB, 2011). Because coconut trees still cover 36% of the net cropped area in Kerala (KSPB, 2011) and provide at least an additional source of income or subsistence for many livelihoods, we chose to situate our study on the relationships between globalisation, liberalisation and livelihoods in this state.

1The commercially by far most important coconut product is copra, the kernel of the nut, from which oil is extracted. Coconut oil is used in cooking and food processing, but also in soaps and cosmetics. The kernel can also be used to produce coconut milk and grated coconut. Other commercial coconut products include coir (coconut fibre), coconut water and toddy.
However, ethnographic research soon discovered that cheap palm oil imports are but one of many explanatory factors for the relative decline of coconut production in Kerala. The ‘practical knowledge’ (Scott, 1998) of local traders and farmers pointed to the additional importance of regional shortages of skilled labour to pluck the coconuts, adulteration practices and the regional coconut market integration leading to increased competition in south India. Furthermore, coconut cultivators rarely referred to a ‘crisis’ of the sector. Perhaps most importantly, we came to realize that official discourses downplayed or ignored these additional explanatory factors for the changes in the coconut sector. This prompted us to interpret the discourse on Kerala’s coconut development as a ‘narrative’ (Roe, 1991), and more particularly as a ‘crisis narrative’ (Roe, 1994) that masks alternative perspectives and explanations and that attempts to justify urgent intervention based on particular standardized policy recommendations (see also Ferguson, 1990).

The objective of this paper, therefore, is to develop a more comprehensive, nuanced and spatially disaggregated explanation of the changes in Kerala’s coconut economy that goes beyond the common macro-level and sectoral analyses. This is achieved through two interrelated undertakings. First, the article seeks to unravel the persistent crisis narrative related to Kerala’s coconut sector. What is the storyline of the narrative? Who are the actors behind it and what are their possible motivations? Second, the paper attempts to represent the diverse and complementary explanations by local traders and farmers that are silenced by the official discourse. How do different local actors interpret the changes in Kerala’s coconut sector? How do they explain them based on their relevant practical knowledge?

The body of this paper proceeds in six parts. In the following section, we introduce the concept of ‘narratives’ and link it to the ‘advocacy coalition framework’ (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993) to better explain why some explanations become reproduced while others remain ‘nonstories’. In the methodology section, information on the methods of data collection and analysis and on the study sites is given. What follows are two empirical parts. First, we examine the ‘coconut crisis narrative’ with reference to the official discourse and related academic literature. Then, we juxtapose the narrative with alternative perspectives on Kerala’s coconut development by local actors. The discussion section triangulates information from different sources to provide a more accurate account of the developments in Kerala’s coconut sector and attempts to explain the emergence and reproduction of the coconut crisis narrative. The conclusions summarize the inaccuracies and erroneousness of the coconut crisis narrative and point to complex spatial restructuring processes in the ‘global countryside’.
2.3 Development narratives, advocacy coalitions and nonstories

Roe defined development narratives as ‘stories–scenarios and arguments–that are taken by one or more parties to the controversy as underwritten (that is, establishing or certifying) and stabilizing (this is, fixing or making steady) the assumptions for policy-making in the face of the issue’s uncertainty, complexity or polarization’ (1994, p. 3). Development narratives are either scenarios with a beginning, middle and end, or they are arguments with a premise and a conclusion that frame problems in particular ways, leading to particular solutions (Roe, 1991). They can include both real and manufactured aspects that tend to ignore local actors and institutions in favour of those in power (Mehta, 2001; Nagothu, 2001). Roe (1991, 1994) argues that narratives drive and sanction most rural development projects and policies in developing countries; they are an important aspect of policy formation. Furthermore, they often take the form of crisis scenarios that reinforce the idea that local people are unable to steward their own resources and thus require external assistance from experts (e.g. government officials, donor agencies, transnational nongovernmental organizations) for efficient resource management (Roe, 1995).

Narratives persist because of their very nature of being simplifications that help to bring order to complex development situations and thus render policy making and interventions possible (Roe, 1991). Crisis narratives, for instance, have been proven useful to stabilize policy making within highly complex and uncertain contexts for a limited time (Roe, 1995). However, the application of generalized remedies to problems, which were analysed in a reductionist way, more often lead to development failures. Inaccurate narratives caused actual crises to occur or intensify (e.g. Hoben, 1995; Rocheleau et al., 1995). As narratives imply specific standardized solutions, moreover, they exclude alternative interpretations and interventions thus reducing ‘policy space’ (Sutton, 1999). Development narratives are therefore inherently political; they inform both policy and public perception and in turn influence the very ‘story’ they represent.

Yet, development and crisis narratives do not exist in isolation. While they are relatively stable and persistent and while their origins and producers tend to be opaque, narratives need to be formed and reproduced by political actors in particular political contexts. Radaelli (1999) therefore suggested reinterpreting policy narratives in the ‘advocacy coalition framework’ (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993), a suggestion we extend to include development narratives. Relatively stable coalitions of governmental institutions, corporate interest groups, scientists, etc. generate narratives, which in turn also provide and communicate the ‘core beliefs’ that help hold together the coalition. Furthermore, narratives are formed within the wider policy envir-
onment (Radaelli, 1999). For example, India’s liberalisation–globalisation–
privatisation policies since the early 1990s provide a new context for the
emergence and reproduction of development and crisis narratives. Finally,
narratives are enhanced through policy forums, where the diverse stakehold-
ers of an advocacy coalition meet and discuss (Radaelli, 1999).

The advocacy coalition framework also refers to opposing coalitions of
political actors. ‘Winning’ and ‘losing’ coalitions may both form and use nar-
ratives; in the case of the losing coalitions, these can be interpreted as ‘count-
ernarratives’ or ‘counterstories’ (Roe, 1994). However, other arguments and
scenarios may never be picked up and propagated by an advocacy coalition;
they remain ‘nonstories’ (Roe, 1994), whether or not they are more accurate
than the development or crisis narrative. Obviously, alternative explanations
by local actors such as farmers, labourers or petty traders rarely become re-
produced as narratives but remain nonstories. Nevertheless, it is widely ac-
cepted among development scholars that such local or ‘practical’ knowledge
is invaluable for a holistic understanding of development processes (Cham-
bers, 1983). Their accounts, therefore, are juxtaposed in this paper with those
of the narrative to gain a more complete picture of coconut-related develop-
ments in Kerala.

2.4 Methodology

The examination of development narratives and nonstories related to changes
within Kerala’s coconut sector necessitated two principal approaches to data
collection and analysis: (1) text analysis of existing documents (government
reports and newspaper articles) to discern the policy narrative, and (2) ethno-
graphic fieldwork (open-ended and semi-structured interviews, Appendix A)
to identify the usually silenced nonstories of local traders and farmers.

To identify political narratives and coconut-related policy initiatives, we
researched the online archives from 2000–11 of The Hindu Business Line,
which is part of the renowned national newspaper The Hindu. This media
outlet was chosen for its quality and accessibility, and particularly for
its regularity in reporting on the Kerala coconut sector and its reliance on
government and other key informants from the sector. In total, 268 coconut-
related articles were identified and analysed using content analysis (Krippen-
dorff, 2010). Furthermore, we examined twenty-four reports from the Gov-
ernment of Kerala, including the five-year plans of 2002-07 and 2007-12, the
annual plans between 2008–12, the eight state budgets between 2004-12, the
Concerns in Agriculture (Government of Kerala, 2003a). We also reviewed ten
reports from the Government of India, including the Kerala Development Re-
port (2008) and the Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices Report on Price
Policy for Copra for the 2000 and 2004–10 seasons. In addition, the website of
the Coconut Development Board was consulted. The information from these texts was compared with insights from the relevant academic literature.

Local perspectives and explanations of the coconut-related changes were derived from semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted during seventeen months of fieldwork (two extended field trips in 2007 and 2008, two short revisits in 2009 and 2010). The ethnographic studies were primarily situated in two grampanchayats (local political-administrative units covering one or more villages) in two different taluks (sub-districts), one each in Chirayinkeezhu Taluk, Thiruvananthapuram District and Chittur Taluk, Palakkad District (see Figure 2.1). Additional interviews were conducted through briefer visits in rural parts of Kollam District, in the city of Kochi, Ernakulam District and in the town of Irinjalakuda and its surrounding villages in Thrissur District, as well as in the town of Kangeyam, Erode District, Tamil Nadu. In total, forty-six interviews with traders of coconuts, copra and oil and twenty-three conversations with coconut farmers were carried out by the first author. The interviews lasted between one-and-a-half and two hours and were conducted in either English or Malayalam (interpreted by local research assistants). This was complemented through twenty-one interviews with local government officials and other key informants, whose responses often diverged from the official discourse.

In order to assess regional variation in developments of the coconut economy within Kerala, we selected the primary study sites in two districts with different agro-ecological, social and historical formations. The Thiruvananthapuram panchayat is largely ‘rurban’ and resides in the rolling hills of Kerala’s southern midlands. Despite the importance of remittances from migrants in the Persian Gulf and service-sector activities, about 60% of the population derives (a part of their) income from agriculture, which is generally small-scale (at most two to four acres), of low intensity but highly diversified. Coconut trees have been grown here for generations, on homesteads and small groves covering a large proportion of the landscape. Indeed, the Thiruvananthapuram panchayat is relatively ‘typical’ of most of low- and midland Kerala.

In contrast, the Palakkad panchayat is flat, distinctively rural and located near the Tamil Nadu border. Here, agriculture is of higher intensity with coconut, mango and paddy as major crops. Regardless of the state land reforms, landowners (present and absentee) have managed to maintain large landholdings of up to 60 acres. Yet, large-scale coconut production is a relatively new phenomenon in Palakkad; coconut cultivation, processing and trade have expanded over the last thirty-five years in response to difficulties faced in paddy production, a trend observable all over Kerala (see further below).
2.5 The ‘coconut crisis’ narrative

The beginning of a ‘coconut crisis’ narrative can be traced to the state government’s Commission of WTO Concerns report (Government of Kerala, 2003a), after a sharp price decline for copra and coconut oil in 2000. The report refers to a crisis in the coconut economy of ‘unprecedented proportions’ (p. 83). The line of argument, reproduced in the texts mentioned in the methodology section, can be summarized as follows: (1) In the wake of the WTO Agreement on Agriculture of 1995, India removed import quotas and reduced import tariffs in the oilseeds sector leading to the increased importation of cheap edible oils, particularly palm oil (‘the beginning’); (2) cheap imported palm oil sub-
stituted for coconut oil resulting in declining demand and prices for domestic coconuts, copra and oil (‘the middle’); (3) declining prices increased the vulnerability of small and marginal farmers in Kerala (the ‘land of coconuts’)2 (‘the end’). In sum, the narrative fixates on externally induced economic change that puts small farmers in Kerala in peril.

The beginning: liberalisation of the oilseeds sector

Being the major cash crop producing state in the country, Kerala is perhaps the most affected by agriculture related trade policies adopted by Government of India . . . . The domestic agricultural products have to compete with cheaper imports due to increasing liberalisation of import regulations. KSPB, 2004, p. 29

The economic literature indicates that the beginning of the coconut crisis narrative is not wrong. Prior to the ratification of the Uruguay Round Agreement on Agriculture in 1995, oilseeds were one of the most protected and subsidized product groups in India. The sector benefited from import substitution policies since the 1970s, including high import tariffs and non-tariff trade barriers, leading to growth in oilseeds production from 10 to 21 million tons from 1980–94. During this period the domestic price of edible oils was 60% higher than the world price (Gulati and Narayanan, 2007). Palm oil imports were irregular and on a small scale.

Trade liberalisation reversed this trend placing increasing pressure on the domestic edible oils sector. The domestic prices of edible oils and oilseeds began to decline as they converged with the international market prices. The successive reduction in import duties (from 65% to 15% from 1994–99 on crude edible oil, for example) and the massive devaluation of regional currencies in the wake of the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997 encouraged more substantial edible oil imports, particularly those of palm oil from Malaysia but also soybean, sunflower and rapeseed oil. As a result, India’s self-sufficiency in edible oils declined from 97% in 1993 to 55% in 2001 (Gulati and Narayanan, 2007).

The middle: Imported palm oil affected the coconut sector

The relatively low price of palm oil led to some extent of substitution of palm oil for coconut oil. During the globalisation period [1996–2003] massive imports of palm oil have depressed coconut oil prices, the effect of which was also reflected in coconut prices. Government of India (2008, p. 160)

2Some claim that the name Kerala comes from keram, a contraction of nalikeram, Sanskrit for coconut. The narrative often refers to the cultural importance of the coconut tree for the people of Kerala. Indeed, a large number of products are derived from the palm.
The middle of the coconut crisis narrative is supported only partially by the economic literature, which mentions an increasing pressure on domestic prices in the coconut sector due to economic liberalisation and global-market integration (Lathika and Kumar, 2009; Narayana et al., 2006; Varma, 2004). However, some of these studies reveal some cracks in the line of argument of the coconut crisis narrative. Despite increasing palm oil imports since the mid-1990s, for instance, prices for coconut oil remained high until a sharp drop in 2000 (Narayana et al., 2006). After the recovery in 2002, there has been no trend of declining or increasingly fluctuating coconut prices; prices generally increased but at a lower pace than prices for non-agricultural goods.

Furthermore, Varma (2004) and Narayana et al. (2006) argued that there is no evidence that large imports of palm oil cause declining prices of coconut and coconut oil in the Indian market. Declining and instable prices are rather a result of an increasing integration of international and domestic coconut markets (Varma, 2004) and loss of India’s comparative advantage due to stagnating productivity in coconut production and lack of diversification into value-added coconut products (Lathika and Kumar, 2009). As member states of ASEAN and SAARC, the major coconut-producing countries (Indonesia, the Philippines and India) have reduced trade barriers so that coconut has become one of the most globalised commodity markets (Narayana et al., 2006). A key feature of such integrated markets is the co-movement of prices and vulnerability to external shocks; prices in Kerala are thus strongly influenced by the supply in Indonesia, the Philippines and other Indian states (Narayana et al., 2006). In contrast, there is no evidence to indicate that large quantities of palm oil brought down the Indian coconut price. Palm oil does not seem to be a strong substitute for coconut oil (Narayana et al., 2006).

The end: The victims – small farmers and the ‘Land of Coconuts’

The human dimension of the crisis directly affected the livelihood of nearly one million of the farm households, representing almost 20% of total farm holdings of the state, and indirectly another two lakhs households, who solely dependent on the processing coir, a by-product of coconut, for their livelihood. While majority of the coconut farmers affected are small and marginal owning less than one half to one hectare of coconut gardens, the affected workers in the coir sector largely belonged to the BPL group.

Government of Kerala (2003a, pp. 83–84)

In view of the fact coconut provides employment to nearly 35 lakh farmers and that coconut is the single most important crop in the state, there is a strong case for mitigating the hardships faced by farmers . . . .

CACP, 2007, pp. 10–11

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Subsequent reports inflated the number of affected farmers or families to 3.5 million (e.g. CACP, 2007; KSPB, 2004) without giving evidence or referring to sources. Indeed, the end of the coconut crisis narrative is the least supported by academic literature. The official reports (wrongly) assumed that the primary source of income of ‘small and marginal farmers’ is coconut production while our own village studies show that most of these smallholders combine a large number of agricultural and increasingly non-agricultural livelihood activities. Our ethnographic data also indicates that the current state of the coconut economy does not represent a crisis in the eyes of the majority of small farmers and that coconut prices are not the main factor for changing land-use and agricultural practices (see below).

The main actors behind the narrative

Through the analysis of the 268 online newspaper articles from 2000–11, we were able to identify the key players of the coconut crisis narrative. The media reported the narrative consistently since 2002 through the more or less same key actors. Alternative views did not appear in the publication. The most important actor of the coconut advocacy coalition was the State Government of Kerala, particularly through representatives from the Kerala State Planning Board (KSPB). This perspective is also well reflected in their annual Economic Reviews. The narrative remained surprisingly consistent between governments formed by the centre-right United Democratic Front coalition (2000–06) and the Left Democratic Front (2006–10), but the derived policy recommendations differed slightly (see following section). Repeating the same storyline, officials of the central government Coconut Development Board were similarly well represented in the analysed media reports.

The narrative was further strengthened through support from private organizations with vested interest in Kerala’s coconut market, such as the Cochin Oil Merchants Association (COMA) and the First Commodities Exchange of India (FCEI) in Kochi. These business associations also depicted farmers as the victims of the coconut crisis and an ailing coconut oil industry. Less important actors included the central government Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices, as well as the non-governmental Peekay Tree Crops Development Foundation and Swadeshi Nalikera Mission (both engaged in promoting ecological agro-forestry and coconut-based integrated farming). Peculiarly absent from this advocacy coalition were farmers’ groups and associations.

A further constituency of the coconut advocacy coalition were Indian scientists, particularly economists from Kerala. For instance, the membership of the Commission of WTO Concerns in Agriculture, whose report evoked the coconut crisis first, was a mix of scientists and senior civil servants. Harilal (see quote at the beginning of this paper) was both a member of the KSPB and an Associate Professor at the Centre for Development Studies (CDS) in
Thiruvananthapuram. His co-authored study with colleagues from CDS (Narayana et al., 2006) was sponsored by the Coconut Development Board. (Yet, the nuanced arguments of that study (see above) were unable to alter the coconut crisis narrative.)

Finally, the narrative’s persistence was also strengthened through its local appeal and embeddedness. Independent from its (declining) economic importance, coconut maintained its cultural significance as Kerala’s tree and claimed root of the state’s and region’s name.

Links to policy

A review of KSPB’s Annual Plans (2003–2011) and Economic Reviews (2003–2010) reveal that the narrative made a link between the problem analysis and the recommended and implemented policies. Policy prescriptions have remained the same since the Commission on WTO Concerns reported: ‘The only immediate strategy to make coconut production to promote sustainable livelihood for the producers is appropriate intervention in the coconut oil market by regulating the import to maintain remunerative price to the domestic producers. The medium and long-term strategy should be management of production to bring down cost of production, where the government policies can play a critical role’ (Government of Kerala, 2003a, p. 85).

International trade policies are obviously not under the jurisdiction of any of the major partners in the coconut advocacy coalition, but the Government of Kerala and CDB consistently lobbied the central government for the reinstatement of tariffs on coconut and palm oil imports and even a ban on imports of palm oil, at least into the port of Kochi, Kerala. Their advocacy efforts were indeed successful: The central government’s Director General of Foreign Trade enacted a ban of palm oil imports into Kochi referring to ‘public interest’ in 2007. Furthermore, the coalition advocated for the stronger export promotion of coconut products. Consequently, the above-mentioned directorate expanded the CDB’s mandate to include export promotion in 2009.

Under its own jurisdiction, furthermore, the Government of Kerala removed the value added tax on copra, coconut oil and tender coconut in 2007 using the narrative of ailing coconut farmers. Initially, merchants’ associations petitioned for this tax break, and COMA and FCEI also advocated futures trading claiming that this would stabilize prices and help farmers. The state government also started to actively support the CDB’s ‘cluster initiative’ in 2009 to encourage groups of farmers to develop integrated farming systems across landholdings and to produce value-added coconut products, such desiccated coconut, beverages, shell based products and coconut cream.

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3 We were not able to determine whether forums between the described political actors helped strengthen this advocacy coalition. However, all of the main actors are located in Kerala (the CDB has its headquarters in Kochi) facilitating the interactions and networks within the coalition.
The resulting diversification is hoped to reduce the dependence on the coconut oil market seemingly threatened by palm oil imports. Further, in a private–public partnership, a leading Indian cosmetics producer began to provide agricultural extension services and subsidized copra dryers to CDB ‘coconut clusters’ in Kerala and it organized copra collection centres with the stated objective to help the farmers and the coconut economy through vertical integration and bypassing traditional intermediaries.

Other coconut-related policies and programs have a much longer history in Kerala and in India, but are now justified in reference to the crisis narrative. For instance, policies such as the setting of an annual minimum support price (‘floor price’) and the implementation of a monopoly cooperative procurement system for copra when prices fall below the fixed minimum support price are referred to as measures to ‘protect coconut farmers’ from volatile prices and ‘exploitative’ intermediaries. Similarly, the state government and the CDB continued programs to increase coconut production and productivity and to reduce production costs through rejuvenating coconut plantations, particularly replanting diseased coconut palms, and adopting improved cultivation technologies.

Generally, the coconut policies and programs pursued by Kerala’s centre-right United Democratic Front governments (2001–6 and since 2011) and the Left Democratic Front (LDF) government (2006–11) were similar. However, the LDF governments employed the coconut crisis narrative more vehemently and focused more strongly on protectionist strategies, including price support systems, than the Congress-led UDF governments that were more closely aligned with the Congress-led coalition that has formed the liberalisation-friendly government at the national level since 2004.

2.6 Alternative perspectives and nonstories

In this section, we discuss alternative perspectives on recent developments in Kerala’s coconut economy as local traders and farmers in Thiruvananthapuram and Palakkad – but also some local government officers and other key informants diverging from the mainstream discourse – have narrated them to us. These alternative perspectives have not found corresponding advocacy coalitions and therefore remained ‘nonstories’ that both expand on and diverge from the coconut crisis narrative. They are thus crucial in qualifying the crisis narrative, providing more nuanced and region-specific explanations and perhaps suggesting alternative policies in the ‘policy space’ hitherto silenced by the narrative.

Did coconut oil become substituted by palm oil?

Many respondents affirmed that palm oil has been increasingly replaced by coconut oil in the food sector. However, local nonstories qualify the claim that
palm oil is an ubiquitous and direct substitute for coconut oil. Changes in the consumption of coconut as a traditional cooking oil in Kerala would not only be a function of comparative prices but also of social status, prestige and cultural choice. As the following statement by a government official indicates, these factors may not translate in the same way between social groups and across space: ‘Ten or fifteen years back . . . we started to import palm oil. Palm oil is now extensively used by the lower income groups in Kerala . . . . One great problem is that, other than Malayalees ['people from Kerala'], nobody else uses [coconut oil] for cooking and there is a limit to how it can be sold as hair oil.’ People who grow coconut, whether they own 10 or 100 trees, will also consume their own nuts and retain a portion of their production to dry copra and process it into oil for household use. Furthermore, the choice of cooking oil is dependent on its use, as a local businessperson explained to us: ‘Palm and coconut oil are used for different things. If we make products such as snacks or chips with coconut oil, they will only keep for five days. But if we use palm oil, they may last for one month. If the price of either of the oils increases or decreases does not matter . . . .’ Whoever uses oil in bulk, like hotels, they use palm.’ By contrast, most households in Kerala prefer coconut to other oils given the choice, particularly for some traditional dishes that can only be prepared with (the generally very strong tasting) coconut oil.

Palm oil seems to be a more likely substitute for coconut in cosmetic and other non-food industries (where almost half of the copra produced in Kerala is used). Despite some unique properties of coconut oil for the industrial production of soaps, a farmer explained: ‘In the past, coconut oil mostly went toward soap making. Now, the large companies use soybean oil, palm oil and sunflower oil.’ Several of our respondents confirmed this, for example this trader and mill owner from Palakkad: ‘Soap and perfume companies used to buy coconut oil but now they use other oils like palm oil. They also use coconut oil but mix it with other oils.’

Did imported palm oil affect the coconut sector?

The power of narratives is of course that they become unquestioned and ‘received wisdom’ (Leach and Mearns, 1996) that percolates down to society. Most of our local interviewees were informed about the issue of cheap imported palm oil through government sources or the media. Some of them reiterated the narrative with uncertainty. For example, a large coconut farmer told us: ‘Some people say that palm oil imports are another reason for the falling coconut price.’ The respondents rarely made a direct link between long-term trends in coconut prices and the generally liberalised trade regime. Rather, some of them saw a connection between short-term price changes and the landing of ships in the port of Kochi, like the farmer cited above: ‘Just a few months ago, the price per nut was six rupees and this had decreased because a ship of palm oil came to Kochi.’ However, the majority of the respondents
did not single out cheap palm oil imports as the main factor for problems in the coconut economy. Some even denied any causal relationship between prices and palm oil imports. A miller-cum-trader explained: ‘The palm oil tariff has been decreased by the government. This should affect the market. But because coconut production has decreased, no affect has been felt.’ This remark suggests that important reasons for the decline in coconut production need to be found elsewhere (see below). Other respondents also reiterated the assertion by Narayana et al. (2006) that an increasingly globalised coconut market, rather than palm oil imports, is setting the prices in Kerala.

However, interviewed traders pointed to another issue than price pressure when discussing palm oil imports. They saw an important link between palm oil imports and the adulteration of coconut oil. The cheaper palm oil was often used to mix with coconut oil. One trader reported: ‘When the oil imports started to come from foreign markets, our business decreased. At that time, whoever sold original coconut oil at the shop could not maintain their business because others sold adulterated coconut oil [at a lower price].’ Blame was often put on oil millers in Tamil Nadu who ‘smuggled’ adulterated coconut oil into Kerala. This would also have led to the closure of many oil mills in Kerala during the 1980s – prior to the substantial liberalisation of the oilseeds sector when palm oil imports were irregular and of a too small scale to influence prices! Traders also opined that the ban on palm oil imports through the port of Kochi in 2007 was futile, as imported and domestic palm and other oils reach Kerala by road and rail from other states. There are no longer restrictions on such inter-state trade.

Indeed, local nonsenses pointed to the primary importance of an increasingly integrated market in south India for Kerala’s coconut economy that has made it difficult to anticipate price changes based on local seasonal production. For example, a trader-cum-miller stated: ‘We can no longer only understand the market trend of Kerala. Now we need to know about the [coconut] production in the next state or other states.’ A large trader in Palakkad told us: ‘[Even] during the main production season [in Kerala], nuts are still imported from other states and this decreases the demand [and prices for the coconuts produced in Kerala].’ Our respondents highlighted the importance of Tamil Nadu where the production of coconuts, copra and oil expanded rapidly over the past thirty-five years. There, coconut cultivation was more profitable because of lower labour and transportation costs; subsidized fertilizers, water and electricity; and better agricultural extension services. Furthermore, copra and coconut oil processing shifted in part from Kochi to the small Tamil Nadu town of Kangeyam, where the climate allows drying operations practically throughout the year without electric or wood dryers. Production costs were further lowered through the widespread use of unskilled migrant labour, hosted in quarters by the mill owners. In the recent past, trade connections between Tamil Nadu and Kerala had become
stronger, particularly along the state border in Palakkad. The regional market integration, increased supply and lower production costs in Tamil Nadu (rather than cheap palm oil imports) then resulted in increased pressure on coconut and copra prices in Kerala.

**Did declining prices motivate farmers to shift away from coconut cultivation?**

The sharp decline of coconut prices in 2000–02 seems to have encouraged some farmers to shift away from coconut cultivation, particularly when they had old trees, as this statement of a farmer in Thiruvananthapuram district demonstrates: ‘We had coconut from my share of the family land. But as the market price decreased or coconut decreased seven years ago [in 2000], we sold it. For three years . . . we had had more expenses than income. So I sold the land and deposited that amount in the share market.’ However, coconut prices recovered after 2002, and farmers reported other primary factors adversely affecting the profitability of coconut cultivation, including high input and labour costs and widespread diseased and ageing coconut palms.

Further, farmers in Thiruvananthapuram district highlighted the problem of a shortage of coconut pluckers. Climbing coconut trees and harvesting the nuts requires specific skills; it is not an activity that anyone can do. Skilled pluckers also know how to maintain the trees as to avoid the spread of diseases. If not plucked timely (that is, after every 45 days), falling nuts are also hazards for the local residents. A retired professor and coconut grower explained the increased shortage of skilled pluckers as follows: ‘Earlier there was one caste [to pluck coconuts], the underprivileged caste, the Thandan. There is stigma associated with this job. If they do this work, they will be seen as the underdog. So, at the first opportunity itself, they will quit this occupation. So we cannot blame them. But this is directly affecting the coconut situation here.’ Another farmer put it less prosaically: ‘You have to worship the lord before you can get a chap to climb the coconut tree . . . . My mother-in-law endlessly asks once in two months when he will appear.’

In Palakkad, agricultural wage rates were comparatively lower than in Thiruvananthapuram and labourers had fewer non-agricultural livelihood alternatives. Nevertheless, farmers and traders expressed concern about the relative shortage of labour, specifically skilled pluckers. A coconut farmer echoed his counterparts in Thiruvananthapuram: ‘It’s very difficult to get a plucker . . . The new generation are not doing this work.’ Furthermore, feudal agricultural labour arrangements were disintegrating in Palakkad (later than in other parts of Kerala): ‘In the past, if the mother was working, the daughter would come [too]. If the daughter came, the daughter-in-law would come [too]. But now they are going for factory work even though the salary is lower.’

However, the large traders in Palakkad (who were often also large coconut
farmers) typically organized plucking labour for the smaller farmers. They also arranged the transportation of the coconuts from the farm gate and dried copra in their yards. While this resembled interlocked markets, the small farmers did not view the intermediaries as ‘exploitative’ (as the narrative did). Rather, they were dissatisfied with procurement system, which was running in some periods during our field research (i.e. in 2007 and 2009) in Palakkad. The cooperative procurement of copra failed to bypass the traders because it could not offer the same services of arranging labour, processing and transportation and it implied delayed payments.

Indeed, if the coconut economy posed a problem for the growers in Kerala, it was one related primarily to labour rather than to stagnating market prices and exploitative intermediaries. Changing labour relations were also a major reason for recent crop shifts in Kerala (see following sub-section).

Was there a coconut crisis at all?

It is important to note that for most small landowners and coconut growers in Thiruvananthapuram district as in most parts of Kerala, agriculture no longer represented the primary livelihood activity. People have become increasingly disinterested in farming. As the above-cited retired professor stated: ‘Most of the farmers are small …. They are not commercial producers. Subsistence farming is mainly carried out by the coconut farmers in this region, not for the market but for their consumption …. Twenty or thirty years ago, coconut cultivation formed a very important component of our lives. That scenario has changed, especially because of migration [to countries in the Persian Gulf].’ As a result, cultivation was generally continued in Thiruvananthapuram but at a low intensity (few inputs, irregular maintenance, delayed replanting, longer gaps between harvests, etc.) and with often even declining productivity.

The situation in Palakkad was different. Here, coconut production has actually been increasing since the 1970s. At the time of our field research in 2007–11, farmers were shifting to coconut cultivation from the more labour-intensive paddy and groundnut cultivation. One farmer told us: ‘We shifted to coconut because it needs less attention than paddy and will still produce.’ Despite declining profit margins (due to increased input costs), the interviewed farmers agreed that coconut cultivation remained profitable in comparison with most other agricultural uses, and Palakkad offered them very limited opportunities for non-agricultural livelihood activities.

However, farmers in Palakkad diversified their products from coconut palms to reduce their vulnerability to output markets. In particular, they contracted out their trees for toddy tapping (local palm wine production).

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4The shift from paddy to coconut and other perennial crops is a process that took place in most parts of low- and midland Kerala but generally earlier than in Palakkad (see Narayanan, 2003; Véron, 1999).
One large farmer told us: ‘We maintain our coconut cultivation through the help of income from toddy tapping . . . . Previously the [nut] production was high [but] the [coconut and copra] market went down . . . . Then we escaped from these things . . . . Everyone gave their trees for toddy tapping, and this in turn caused the production [of coconuts] to decrease.’

Farmers responded to the decline in coconut and copra prices in 2000–02 and their consequent relative stagnation by diversifying their agricultural and non-agricultural livelihoods. From the interviewed coconut farmers’ perspective, there was no real crisis. For most agricultural landowners in the Thiruvananthapuram panchayat, cash income from coconut was not important enough for copra prices to trigger a crisis. Coconut farmers in the Palakkad panchayat diversified their production so that coconut cultivation remained relatively attractive and profitable compared with the cultivation of other agricultural crops.

2.7 Discussion

Toward a more accurate perspective on changes in Kerala’s coconut economy

Our data shows that the evocation of a crisis in relation to the state of Kerala’s coconut economy has to be put in perspective with the farmers’ own interpretations and the regional differences in changes related to coconut cultivation. The crisis narrative extrapolates increased vulnerability among smallholders from an analysis of declining or fluctuating profitability of copra and coconuts. However, this represents an inadequately narrow sectoral view that overlooks the reality of diverse livelihoods. Only few farmers in Kerala, and hardly any smallholders, rely solely on coconuts and copra for their livelihood. Far from being passive victims of external influences, coconut growers in Kerala are actively diversifying their livelihoods. The narrative also ignores other livelihoods in the coconut sector, including those of labourers, traders and processors.

Furthermore, the decline of coconut production and productivity is not ubiquitous in Kerala; in some regions and for some types of growers growing coconut trees remains attractive. Palakkad in particular seems to have an agro-ecological advantage in the coconut sector through its relatively flat landscape and agrarian structure, including large landholdings. It has also a spatial advantage due to its proximity to Tamil Nadu to where the centre of coconut production and trading is shifting.

Of course, this is not to argue that Kerala’s coconut economy is not facing problems. The liberalised import of cheap palm oil is certainly one, but it is mitigated through the fact that palm is not an ideal substitute for coconut oil. The integration of international and especially regional (trans-state) coconut
and copra markets seems to have a bigger influence on demand and price movements in Kerala and therefore represents an important challenge for millers, traders and growers in Kerala. While millers and traders may be able to revert to cheaper raw materials from neighbouring states, coconut growers are faced with an acute problem of labour shortage. While shortage of (skilled) agricultural labour is a general issue in Kerala, the absence of skilled pluckers not only delays harvests and reduces productivity but also affects the proper maintenance of the palms that is needed to avoid the further spread of diseases.

Reasons for the emergence and reproduction of the crisis narrative

That narratives can be inaccurate is of course neither new nor surprising. But how can one explain the emergence and persistence of the coconut crisis narrative since 2003? Why has the narrative remained attractive for the political actors of the coconut advocacy coalition despite its obvious flaws? In this sub-section, we can no longer draw upon textual or interview data, but we have to rely on logical inferences to make our tentative arguments.

The WTO Agreement on Agriculture in 1995 signified a changed policy environment in India and in Kerala. The globalisation and liberalisation, as well as the international and domestic integration, of the oilseeds market also added to the complexity of coconut economy in Kerala. Then there was the massive drop in coconut and copra prices in the early 2000s. This was a fertile context for the emergence of a new narrative helping to simplify a complex situation to enable policy-making. Furthermore, the coconut crisis narrative can be seen in the wider context of an anti-liberalisation and anti-globalisation discourse in India (e.g. Bagchi, 1999; Chandrasekhar and Ghosh, 2002; Patnaik, 1999). This discourse also victimizes farmers and evokes the sceptre of an ‘agrarian crisis’ caused by liberalisation policies and simultaneous declines in government support for rural development (e.g. Patnaik, 2007, 2005; Reddy and Mishra, 2009).

However, farmer organizations are suspiciously absent from the coconut advocacy coalition in Kerala. Still, a blunt argument could be made that the main constituents of this coalition have a self-interest in reproducing the coconut crisis narrative; that is, to attract attention and funds to Kerala, the CDB, coconut-related business associations and NGOs. One of the reasons for the Government of Kerala to engage in this narrative may well be to show to its population and electorate that it is ‘doing something’ for Kerala (vis-à-vis India). Other stakeholders, particularly the CDB, may use the documentation of alleged problems and challenges in the coconut economy to justify their very existence.

However, we showed that there are real challenges for Kerala’s coconut sector other than the liberalised importation of cheap palm oil. We assume that the main constituents of the coconut advocacy coalition, the Government
of Kerala and the CDB, are also well aware of the described alternative explanations of changes of the coconut economy. Yet, the focus on a liberalised trade regime may help to shift the blame for stagnation away from the Government of Kerala to the national and global scales, and away from the CDB to the level of trade policies. Obviously, the state government’s own policies of regulating the copra market through procurement and minimum support prices, as well as the CDB’s programmes to increase coconut production and productivity, had remained relatively ineffective to avert the stagnation of the sector.

Interestingly, the dominant policy prescriptions inherent in the coconut crisis narrative (i.e. intervention in the coconut oil market in the short term and production-cost reduction in the long term) are in line with many pre-existing Government of Kerala policies and CDB programs. To some extent, therefore, existing blueprint policies and programs have shaped the crisis narrative as much as the latter circumscribes the ‘space’ for alternative policies. The narrative may have been attractive to its main proponents because it relates to interventions they find doable. Also new interventions, such as the lift on the value added tax on copra or the creation of coconut clusters, fall into the category of relatively standard approaches of market regulation and production support. By contrast, the issue of labour shortages may not have been integrated in the coconut crisis narrative because of the lack of tested policy instruments to mitigate the problem. It is of little help to identify a problem without being able to propose a solution, a fix to it. It also seems neither feasible nor desirable to discourage members of the Thandan community, Kerala’s traditional coconut plucker caste, from looking for alternative, socially more respected, economic activities.5

2.8 Conclusion

As most development narratives, Kerala’s coconut crisis narrative partly represents an oversimplification of a complex reality. The large-scale importation of cheap palm oil after the liberalisation of the oilseeds sector in the mid-1990s, along with other and largely more important factors such as the general reorientation to non-agricultural livelihood activities, shortage of skilled plucking labour, increased market integration and competition with other coconut- and copra-producing south Indian states, oil adulteration practices and diffusion of tree diseases, has to some extent adversely affected the re-

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5Since the end of our field research in 2010, however, the CDB started an innovative program to train unemployed youth as coconut pluckers in twelve so-called ‘Friends of the Coconut Tree’ centres. The idea is not only to teach them climbing skills and proper tree maintenance practices but also to change the image of the profession by giving them uniforms, mobile phones and motorcycles (Ittyipe, 2011). CDB also tried (with mixed success) to make the climbing of coconut trees easier with the help of new mechanic and motorized tree-climbing devices replacing the coir ropes. The latest plan is to employ trained monkeys to harvest the coconut trees.
lative attractiveness, profitability and productivity of coconut cultivation in Kerala. The narrative also overlooks key components to Kerala’s diminishing position within the coconut sector in India, such as the state’s agro-ecology (particularly the typical undulating midland hills) and fragmented landholding patterns that are ill-suited for commercial large-scale coconut production. And it does not account for regional differences within Kerala: Palakkad, for example, with its flatter landscape, dryer climate, larger landholdings and different social historical context than most other parts of Kerala has shown a distinct coconut development path.

In other aspects, however, the coconut crisis narrative is outright wrong. Particularly, the portrayal of (small) coconut farmers in Kerala as victims of liberalisation-induced change is misplaced. First, the majority of (small) coconut growers have diversified livelihoods and not depended solely (nor even heavily) on the coconut economy. Thus, farmers have not really experienced a crisis when coconut prices collapsed in 2000–02 and stagnated later. Coconut cultivation has also remained relatively attractive compared with the cultivation of other, more labour-intensive crops. Second, the narrative’s fixation on farmers masks the varying effects of the crisis on different social classes working in the coconut sector, including different types of labourers (pluckers, loaders, mill-factory workers, etc.), middlemen, petty and large other traders, small and large mill processors and owners. The reasons why the constituents of the advocacy coalition behind the coconut crisis narrative (i.e. officials of the Government of Kerala and the CDB, representatives of oil merchants, and some small NGOs) have highlighted the lot of farmers is a moot point. However, the narratives’ scientific foundation in macro-economic sectoral analyses, rather than in micro-level studies taking people’s livelihoods as their starting point, seems to have facilitated the fixation on coconut production and farmers.

Because of its ancient trade with spices and colonial plantations, Kerala has for a very long time been a ‘global countryside’. Interestingly, recent agricultural liberalisation has not simply and uniformly strengthened the state’s global orientation. Rather, reforms of the domestic market in India in the wake of international trade liberalisation (e.g. implementation and harmonisation of the value added tax, lifting of restrictions on movements of goods within India) have facilitated market integration at the regional scale, in the case of coconut between the south Indian states. Apart from (or because of) an increased exposure to global and regional coconut markets, furthermore, coconut producers also re-localized particular economic activities: the coconut growers in Thiruvananthapuram district have since the 1980s increasingly focused on copra production for home consumption; coconut farmers in Palakkad have rented out their palms for toddy tapping since the early 2000s to local processors that produce palm wine for local consumption. This happened at the expense of overall copra productivity and thus of
the non-local commercial production of coconut oil. Because of such trends of ‘regionalization’ and ‘localization’, it is more accurate to speak of ‘restructuring of social space’ than of ‘globalisation’ in regard to developments in Kerala’s coconut economy.

Finally, the nonstories of farmers and traders also point to weaknesses of the implemented policies related to the coconut crisis narrative, particularly the protectionist policies aiming to bolster domestic coconut and copra prices and to bypass allegedly exploitative middlemen. In the eyes of local farmers, the ban on palm oil imports into the port of Kochi remained ineffective and the benefits of the cooperative procurement of copra at minimum support prices failed to reach the small cultivators in Kerala. To do justice to their complexity, however, we will have to discuss these policies and their varied impact in another paper.

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Agency within a socially regulated labour market: a study of ‘unorganised’ agricultural labour in Kerala

3.1 Abstract

This paper combines insights from the social structures of accumulation framework, and a carefully delineated understanding of agency, to provide a conceptual and empirical contribution to the field of labour geography. This framework allows for a nuanced understanding of the complexity of the labour process as evinced by in-depth research conducted on the coconut industry in Kerala, India. The Kerala coconut industry has experienced various market changes post-agricultural liberalisation in the mid-1990s. The Government of Kerala has indicated these changes, including increasing imports of palm oil and new trade agreements, have led to a crisis; an issue of considerable importance to the state economy and farmers’ livelihoods. More recent government explanations for the crisis include a labour shortage; particularly an inadequate supply of coconut harvesters. This simplistic explanation (based on neoclassical economic models) masks the complexity of locally constituted labour dynamics in an ‘unorganised’ labour market. A more nuanced understanding reveals that labour market organisation varies
by place and difficulties are more adequately explained through changing agrarian relations and the inability to sufficiently control labour. These findings lead to three primary arguments: (1) labour markets are socially and spatially structured and their regulation varies with geographical, historical and political–economic processes in particular places; (2) unorganised labour is able to regulate itself socially and informally, albeit in small ways; and (3) a structural approach is valuable to understand labour agency and the ways informal, unorganised labour is regulated.

3.2 Highlights

→ Labour markets are socially and spatially structured. → Unorganised labour regulates itself socially and informally. → A combined structure–agency approach is valuable to understand labour dynamics. → Neoclassical economic understanding of labour market change is inadequate for policy. → Coconut crisis in Kerala is linked to changing structures of labour control.

3.3 Keywords

Social Structures, Labour Agency, Unorganised Labour, Agriculture, Kerala, India

3.4 Introduction

Key theoretical discussions in labour geography evolve from the recognition that labour markets are socially structured (see, for example Coe, 2000; Jonas, 1996; Massey, 2005; Peck, 1996) and ‘locally constituted’ (Peck, 1996). Recent literature reviews argue academic work has focused on a few (mainly ideological) structures at a time (e.g. gender, class, race) (Coe, 2013; Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2011; Tufts and Savage, 2009), manufacturing sectors in the West, and ‘success stories’ of collectively organised trade unions (Castree, 2007; Coe, 2013; Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2011; Lier, 2007). A need remains for research that answers Kelly’s (2001) call for a ‘more nuanced’ understanding of local labour markets in the developing world; research that recognizes the prevalence, geographic variability and fluidity of informal institutions (Kelly, 2001). Harriss-White’s (2003) version of the social structures of accumulation (SSA) approach (originally developed by Gordon et al. (1982)) provides one way to address these gaps. Her approach focuses on the multiple structures and relations of accumulation, and informal, unorganised labour markets in rural and small town India. Central to the analysis is the way social structures (caste, class, gender, space, and the workforce) influence organisation and discipline of labour power, and the ways this shapes accumulation. Particularly relevant for the current paper, she argues that no social structure
should be a priori favoured over another (though some emerge as more important), they operate in relation to one another and are historically informed (Harriss-White, 2003).

To develop a more nuanced understanding of the complexity of labour dynamics, it is important to consider labour agency. Labour geography has pursued this challenge in various ways post-Herod’s (1997) call for a ‘labour geography’ approach versus a ‘geography of labour’. This led to a move away from a structuralist and capital-centric approach to one that focuses on labour as change agents (see Lier, 2007). Agency, though a ‘signature feature’ of labour geography (Castree, 2007, p. 855), arguably remains under-theorised and its various forms within specific geographical contexts inadequately delineated (Castree, 2007; Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2011). Castree (2007, p. 858) argues ‘a discriminating grasp of worker agency that both informs and arises from a variety of empirical studies’ is missing.

Work in labour geography is beginning to address this gap by expanding notions of agency, including exploring the individual agency of unorganised labour (Carswell and Neve, 2013; Lund-Thomsen, 2013; Rogaly, 2009), and a nuanced approach that incorporates various individual and socialised forms of agency in particular places (Cumbers et al., 2010). These studies reveal that various forms of ‘everyday’ resistance warrant greater emphasis as important aspects of class struggle that can influence local labour relations. Of particular conceptual relevance, Katz’s (2004) threefold classification of agency (resilience, reworking, resistance) is suggested as a useful way forward (Coe, 2013; Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2011; Cumbers et al., 2010). Katz develops her framework through two long-term comparative case studies centred on people’s ‘everyday’ strategies. Her goal is to ‘provide a more nuanced account of responses to significant political-economic change’ (Katz, 2004, p.x) that avoids labelling every autonomous act as one of resistance. Recent suggestions for advancing work in labour geography emphasise the need for a conceptualisation that places the actions of labourers within the various structures and relations in which they are embedded, while recognising regional variation and historical influence (‘multiple geographies and temporalities’) (Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2011, p. 214; Coe 2013).

This paper aims to contribute to labour geography by embracing this challenge through a nuanced analysis that places the actions of unorganised agricultural labour within a socially structured workforce. Coupling Harriss-White’s (2003) SSA framework with Katz’s (2004) work on agency provides a useful conceptual contribution to the field. The approach follows recent trajectories to ‘profile the structural (albeit geographically variable) position of labour within capitalism and to highlight the instances of progressive change achieved by workers’ (Coe, 2013, p. 9). This approach differs from recent conceptualisations within the global production networks school (Carswell and Neve, 2013; Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2011; Riisgaard, 2009; Riisgaard and Ham-
mer, 2011) through its focus on locally constituted labour dynamics and ‘unorganised’ labour agency. This allows for a discussion of the concrete forms of subaltern responses to the social order that go beyond accommodation of existing social structures, while recognising that not all strategies employed are progressive. Furthermore, this paper makes an empirical contribution to research within labour geography that moves outside of collectively organised labour in manufacturing sectors in the West (see, for example James and Vira, 2012; Rigg et al., 2004; Rogaly, 2009). This is accomplished through an in-depth discussion of unorganised coconut pluckers (harvesters) in two regions within Kerala, India.

Research on coconut market change to-date, has primarily comprised macro-level economic studies (Lathika and Kumar, 2009; Narayana et al., 2006, 2001; Varma, 2004). Local level studies across Kerala are absent, although recent changes are often described as a ‘crisis’ and very important to the economy and farmers’ livelihoods (Government of Kerala, 2003a). Concerns centre on changes driven by agricultural liberalisation (1995), including a coconut price decline at the turn of the millennium, increasing palm oil imports, declining remuneration for coconut farmers and new trade agreements with coconut producing countries (including a free trade zone between southeast Asia and India). Palm oil is often singled out as a cause of depressed coconut oil prices, and for the substitution of domestic and industrial use of coconut oil (Government of Kerala 2003a; Harilal 2010; see also Narayana et al. 2006). In addition to these changes, a shortage of plucking labour is included in more recent explanations of the ‘crisis’ by the Governments of India and Kerala. Inadequate labour supply is identified in policy and planning documents as a primary concern (see, for example CACP, 2010; KSPB, 2012).

Explanations of the crisis are often based on neoclassical economic models, and thus result in policy ‘solutions’ that mask the complexity of market change and labour dynamics. Recent government initiatives centre on training new pluckers from low caste communities (including women) and mechanisation of coconut harvesting (http://coconutboard.nic.in/ KSPB, 2012). However without understanding (or acknowledging) changing labour relations and regional variations in the labour process, programmes to address the labour shortage may prove inadequate. Labour supply in Kerala has been undergoing wider changes, in tandem with a demographic transition routed in processes of social development (Kannan 1999, p. 143; Thomas 2003). Changing employment preferences and alternative (yet limited) opportunities in the tertiary sector, have led to an agricultural labour shortage (particularly during peak seasons) and increasing bargaining power for labour (Véron, 1999).

The complexity of labour markets in India are not adequately captured through emphasis on supply and demand alone (Binswanger and Rosenz-
weig, 1984; Harriss-White, 2003). Labour is controlled through the manipulation of various social identities and through the segmentation and fragmentation of labour markets (Harriss-White, 2003). Within India informal economic activity, which lies ‘outside the institutions of state regulation’ (Harriss-White, 2010, p. 171), is socially structured (e.g. through class, caste, gender, religion and locality) (Carswell, 2013; Carswell and Neve, 2013; De Neve, 2005; Harriss-White, 2003, 2010; Harriss-White and Janakarajan, 2004; Rogaly, 1996). This is particularly important since the Government of India estimate (2004–2005) places the number of informal labourers at 92% of the workforce, with the majority of workers in the agricultural sector unorganised (NCEUS, 2008). Kerala, recognised for its high social development and its distinct history of trade union militancy and participation within India (see Justino, 2006), fares better than most states, yet it still has a largely informal workforce (81.3%) (NCEUS, 2008). For collectively organised labour, social structures (particularly caste) also mediate who has access to union membership and which community groups or occupations are supported by government policies and actions (Harriss-White 2003; for examples from Kerala see Heller 1995; Nair 2006, 1994). Thus, an approach that considers labour’s actions within a socially structured workforce, is imperative to understand labour market change in Kerala.

The paper is organised as follows. The next two sections describe the theoretical framework and research methodology, followed by historically informed overviews of the study regions. The fifth section focuses on an empirically derived discussion of key social structures, their relations, and the agency of labour within these structures. The final section highlights key empirical findings on the coconut labour market in Kerala and connects theoretical and empirical insights.

3.5 Framing the research: Labour agency and social structures of accumulation

Harriss-White’s social structures of accumulation (SSA) approach is a variation of the original framework developed by Gordon et al. (1982) and Kotz et al. (1994). Their SSA approach provides a way to characterise capitalism by long-wave periods of development, and focuses on social institutions that regulate accumulation and distribution. McDonough (2008), an economist and one of the editors of Kotz et al. (1994), shows that much of the work within the SSA framework is now conducted in disciplines other than economics, with particularly detailed analyses in sociology. There are also connections between the approach and work in economic and labour geography. Peck’s (1996) work on the social regulation of labour is particularly relevant here. Peck reviews the regulation and segmentation literature, including the SSA framework, while deriving key insights from the application
of regulation theory to labour markets. Furthermore, Labao et al. (1999) apply the macro-level SSA approach to a local level analysis of the relationship between industrial structure, institutional arrangements and income inequality in two locations and historical periods in the United States. But Harriss-White’s (2003) use of the framework is unique for its flexible conceptualisation through which to analyse the social regulation of informal labour at the local level.

Harriss-White (2003) deviates from the original SSA approach through her focus on (1) peripheral areas in a developing economy, (2) explicit attention to informal social structures and their impact on the accumulation process, and (3) a methodological approach based on field economics and economic anthropology. Furthermore, her analysis does not trace dynamics over time, but ‘statically as a way of imposing an analytically useful order on the immense complexity of the Indian economy’ (Harriss-White, 2003, p. 239). Also unique is her identification of space as a social structure. Her analysis was the first to explicitly include space within an SSA framework. Harriss-White (2003) argues economic activity is conducted in specific places and forms spatial patterns. In turn these patterns influence the outcomes of specific activities. Particularly important is the formation of economic clusters, and how they are informed by the historical evolution of agricultural structure and caste distribution in particular regions in India (Harriss-White, 2003). These variations mark her work as ‘a kind of milestone’ for the framework (McDonough, 2008, p. 159).

This SSA approach offers labour geography a way to move ‘beyond the limited confines of the networks-and-embeddedness paradigm’ to ‘a more broadly based and purposive conversation with various currents within social-constructivist and macroeconomic sociology’ (Peck, 2005, p. 129). This interdisciplinary approach Peck (2005) suggests for economic geography, offers labour geography a way to unpack the complexity of labour dynamics within a ‘locally constituted’ and socially regulated labour market. Both Mitchell (2011) Lambert and Gillan (2007) stress the need for studies that situate labour agency within the structures workers are embedded; ‘to take seriously the already existing geography of production and reproduction’ (Mitchell, 2011, p. 585). Harriss-White’s (2003) approach provides a means to understand the specific ways individual social structures work to regulate labour, and thus avoids conflating each structure as networks or ‘social capital’. Harriss-White’s (2003) analysis centres on the ways capital manipulates key social structures to control labour. Similar to work in labour geography, she emphasises the difficulty of labourers to collectively organise and exercise resistance. Harriss-White (2003) argues agency is mainly expressed in ‘every day forms of resistance’ because social structures make labour easy to control and hard to collectively organise. The ability of social structures to be manipulated in favour of capital to control labour often overrides the...
ability of individuals or small groups (at the village or firm level) to improve labour rights on a scale large enough to influence the labour market (Harriss-White, 2003). But subaltern responses of unorganised labour can contribute to changed labour relations in small ways (Cumbers et al., 2010; Katz, 2004). This can make labour somewhat more difficult to control, and possibly open up opportunities to reconfigure social structures, leading to labour market change.

Katz’s (2004) conception of overlapping forms of agency into resilience, reworking and resistance provides a useful addition to Harriss-White’s framework. These strategies deserve explicit attention, particularly within a socially regulated, ‘unorganised’ labour market such as India’s, where resistance is nearly impossible (see Harriss-White, 2003). Resilience takes diverse forms and refers to those ‘small acts’ (Scott 1985; Katz 2004, p. 244) of coping, that do not fundamentally change social relations but do help people cope with their everyday realities. Resilience strategies include migration, ‘everyday acts of neighbouring’ or care giving (e.g. child care), self-help organisations (Katz, 2004, p. 246) and absenteeism because of poor work conditions (Helms and Cumbers, 2006). But, as Cumbers et al. (2010) note, resilience may also take more socially destructive forms such as high levels of school drop-out rates and work in criminal activity.

Reworking strategies are less ambiguous than resilience. They encompass people’s efforts to create spaces to improve their material well-being; it is an ‘attempt to recalibrate power relations and redistribute resources’ (Katz, 2004, p. 247). This requires recognition of the conditions of oppression faced, though it does not directly challenge hegemonic power. For example, reworking strategies may include residents taking over derelict spaces to develop community gardens, expanding access to education resulting in the reworking of local material social practices (Katz, 2004), or informal (and illegal) economic practices such as ‘bumping the catalogue’ (Cumbers et al., 2010, p. 64).1

Alternatively, resistance requires ‘the invocation of an oppositional consciousness’, where strategies ‘draw on and produce a critical consciousness to confront and redress historically and geographically specific conditions of oppression and exploitation’ (Katz, 2004, p. 251). These strategies include collectively organised campaigns to improve labour rights (for examples see Cumbers et al., 2010), and more ‘maverick forms’, such as those found by Katz (2004) in Sudan. There, peasants engaged as tenants allowed their animals to graze on cotton in a state-sponsored contract farming scheme. This allowed the tenants to recuperate economic losses and redirect resources to themselves in a deliberate attempt to undermine the agricultural project’s

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1Cumbers et al. (2010) found that people living in tenements were using addresses of neighbours on holidays or using false names and returning worn clothing to avoid paying for ordered merchandise.
success (Katz, 2004).

The empirical discussion and analysis of this paper (Section 5) explicitly addresses the relationship between social structures regulating the workforce and labour agency. The approach employed captures the complexity of labour dynamics in the Kerala coconut industry. First, it is necessary to situate this discussion through an outline of the research methodology and a historically-informed description of the study regions.

3.6 Methodology

Ethnographic fieldwork was conducted in Kerala to examine accumulation, and the ways local labour markets and labour relations are socially structured within the coconut industry. To explore possible regional variation in accumulation strategies and ‘unorganised’ labour relations, the research centred on two gram panchayats (village-level elected councils) in two different taluks (revenue sub-districts): one each in Chirayinkeezhu Taluk, Thiruvananthapuram District and Chittur Taluk, Palakkad District (Figure 3.1). The study panchayats were selected for their varied geography (ecology, terrain, physical location), agrarian structure and political-economic history. The panchayats are located in different ecological zones and physical terrains; Thiruvananthapuram in the coastal low- and mid-lands and Palakkad in the mid-lands. The dry climate in Chittur and Palakkad Taluks differ from the rest of Kerala, they are similar to Tamil Nadu, but the average rainfall is suitable for cultivation (Government of Kerala, 2003b).

Research was conducted during 17 months of fieldwork (two extended field trips in 2007 and 2008, two short revisits in 2009 and 2010). Two methods of data collection, household surveys and indepth interviews, were used. The survey and majority of interviews were conducted in Malayalam, with some conducted in English and Tamil. Local research assistants provided summary interpretations in the field. The household survey (Appendix B) was conducted in six wards, three within each panchayat. Wards were chosen to reflect the socio-economic characteristics of the panchayat, and for their importance in coconut production, processing and trade for people’s livelihoods. A diverse sample of mainly Hindu, and a minority of Christian and Muslim households, belonging to varying class and caste groups was taken. Livelihood strategies, labour organisation and accumulation and production strategies were primary components of the survey. Surveyed households were based on a stratified random sample, strategically sampling every third house. In total, 569 households were surveyed with a sample population of between 17 and 21 percent per ward. The survey data includes quantitative variables and qualitative detail. Descriptive statistics and pivot tables were used to analyse the quantitative data.

Open-ended and semi-structured interviews (Appendix A) were used to
understand labour relations and the labour process through key SSAs and the ways they intersect to regulate the workforce. In total, 101 interviews were conducted: 24 with pluckers, 58 with their employers (22 coconut farmers, 36 coconut/coconut oil traders), and eight with toddy tappers (palm/coconut wine harvesters). Twenty-one interviews with local government officials and other key informants were also conducted. All interviews were electronically recorded and additional observations handwritten. The interviews were transcribed in their recorded language. The Malayalam and Tamil transcriptions were translated through a collaborative process with research assistants. The qualitative survey and interview data was organised, coded and analysed through both a grounded theory approach and directly applying Harriss-White’s (2003) framework and Katz’s (2004) threefold classification of resistance. NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software, was used as a tool to facilitate data organisation and analysis through a user-led approach.

3.7 The study regions: A brief historical review

The ecology, features of the landscape and location have been influential in the varied cultural and economic development within Kerala (Singh, 2002a). Yet this alone does not explain the regional variation in agricultural patterns, capitalist expansion, industrial development and labour market organisation. The different political and economic histories of each area hold greater influence (Varghese, 1970).

Before the formation of Kerala state (1956), the territory comprised the states of Travancore–Cochin (central and south Kerala) and Malabar (north Kerala). Thiruvananthapuram District belonged to erstwhile Travancore, a princely state under indirect control by the British through treaties until Indian Independence (1947) (Menon, 2003). Palakkad was part of Malabar District within the Madras Presidency (provincial administrative division), under direct control of the British. Particularly relevant is the earlier social reform and capitalistic development of Travancore from the mid 19th century. The Raja (king) of Travancore contributed to earlier development of the region through social reforms and investment in education and infrastructure. The majority of cultivated and cultivable lands were under state ownership, and owner-cultivators comprised the largest agrarian class. This helped facilitate land reforms (1865) in Travancore, and led to land as a marketable asset, with capitalism infiltrating agriculture more deeply than elsewhere. In Malabar, landless labourers and tenants formed the largest agrarian classes, and British policies strengthened landlord control and feudal relations. The agrarian structure varied across the region with greater insecurity and inequality in tenure in the paddy regions of South Malabar and freer labour in Travancore (see Herring 1983, pp. 153–179; Nair and Adoor 1986; Varghese 1970).
Coconut was important for agrarian settlement and central to the development of industry and international trade in Kerala (Kosambi, 2008, p. 189). By mid 19th century, copra (dried coconut kernel, mainly processed into coconut oil), coir (coconut husk fibre, mainly processed into rope, mats, mattresses) and coconut oil were among the region’s primary international exports (Aiya, 1906, vol. 3). In the 20th century, British led industrial development was initially confined to coir manufacturing industries in the southwest of erstwhile Travancore (Varghese, 1970)—a location ecologically suitable, accessible and conducive to capital investment. Backwaters (a chain of brackish lagoons and lakes) were used to prepare coconut husks and transport the products to port in Cochin. This area of erstwhile Travancore had lands
available for a secure lease (unlike Malabar) and a stronger transportation and communication system than other parts of Kerala (Varghese, 1970).

The varied histories and geography of the regions (politically, economically, ecologically and culturally) of Kerala continue to influence the ways production, accumulation and labour markets are socially structured. Today, Thiruvananthapuram panchayat has a ‘rurban’ (neither rural or urban (Sreekumar, 1990)) settlement pattern relatively ‘typical’ of low- and mid-land Kerala. Service-sector activities and migrant remittances from the Persian Gulf are important contributions to people’s livelihoods. However agriculture still contributes to a portion of income for approximately 60% of the population (KSPB, 2002). Palakkad panchayat, nestled in a mountain pass in the Western Ghats, and adjacent to the Tamil Nadu border, differs geographically though its flat landscape and predominantly rural character. Agricultural intensity varies between the panchayats. Thiruvananthapuram is characterised by low intensity in small gardens and homesteads, and Palakkad with more intense production on larger scale plantations. Palakkad was the only district that experienced a significant average increase in area under coconut (2000–2010), while the majority of other districts experienced a decline (including Thiruvananthapuram).

3.8 Agency within a socially structured labour market in Kerala

Coconut is a perennial crop with the more common variety in Kerala commencing production about 5 years after planting. The crop has a unique seasonality whereby coconuts are produced on a predictable schedule and year-round. Mature coconut bunches (ideal for copra and coconut oil) are ready for harvesting every 45 days during the dry summer months and every 60 days during the rainy season. If the harvest is delayed, this delays new production (Thampan, 1993). Labour is specialised, but above all, coconut production is very hard to mechanise. The requirement is thus for a (relatively skilled but nevertheless manual) labour-force in the vicinity, that can be used as and when required. This requires certain incentives or bonds to control labour and regulate the workforce. These strategies vary by region, reflecting political–historical social structures and their relations (see, for example Nair and Adoor, 1986; Oommen, 1971, 1984; Singh, 2002a; Varghese, 1970). Additionally, social structures both condition resistance strategies and result from various forms of historical agency.

Land ownership and traditional occupations in Kerala are still primarily structured through caste ideology. Caste categories are defined under the

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2District level data on coconut production by area (in hectares) (1971–1972 to 2000–2010) was compiled from the Department of Economics and Statistics, Government of Kerala, to calculate the average change in production by district.
Constitution of India (1950) (e.g. Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes), and subdivided into community groups defined by traditional occupations. Low caste communities were the traditional landless labourers and slave castes. Particularly relevant for this paper are the Scheduled Castes, or the ‘untouchables’ (those considered polluting by touch or proximity), who together with the Scheduled Tribes were the most socially excluded communities. Caste and class tend to overlap with caste structuring labour–land relations, and thus, production and accumulation. The labour performed by a particular community reflects their social position within society. Those who labour as coconut palm climbers (both pluckers and toddy tappers) are traditionally drawn from low caste communities and hold a low social status.

The following discussion reveals that although these structures still work together to actively regulate the workforce, the labour market is changing as these structures and their relations are reworked and labour becomes more difficult to control. Central to the discussion, is labour’s ability to act within a socially structured workforce. The subsections are organised according to Harriss-White’s (2003) discussion of the workforce, but maintains a narrowed focus on labour–land and production relations, the spatial unit for labour, coercion in contracts and caste and class. These are particularly important to understand the labour process for pluckers. Using Katz’s (2004) threefold classification of resistance, the agency of ‘unorganised’ pluckers is discussed in relation to key forms of workforce control and regulation. A comparative focus on two regions in Kerala reveals the ‘locally constituted’ nature of the labour market—a summary of which is provided in the concluding subsection.

**Labour–land and production relations**

The varied histories of agrarian organisation and development in Thiruvananthapuram and Palakkad translate into distinct differences in labour market organisation within the coconut industry. Agriculture in Thiruvananthapuram is mainly of low intensity, rainfed and on a small-scale (2–4 acres). It is highly diversified, with coconut cultivated as a primary crop, about 5% of which is under irrigation in the district (Ecostat, 2010). Coconut production (as in most of Kerala) has experienced a decline in productivity. This decline has been linked to the large proportion of old coconut palms and coconut disease, especially in the southwestern districts (CACP, 2009; Government of Kerala, 2003a; Government of India, 2008). Our research shows coconut cultivation increasing as a subsistence crop (for raw nuts and coconut oil), as households move away from commercial agriculture as a primary means of livelihood. Most farmers surveyed in Thiruvananthapuram indicated they keep the majority of their coconuts for their household, only selling them to traders when they have a surplus.
Most farmers, pluckers and traders specified that farmers are using low levels of inputs (irrigation, fertiliser), over-planting, inconsistently replanting, using inferior seedlings and practising minimal coconut palm maintenance (see also Narayana et al., 2001). These changes are arguably related to small and fragmented landholdings, high cost of inputs, and difficulty accessing and controlling labour.

In tandem with these processes, our surveys and interviews reveal a declining interest in agricultural production and work. One farmer-cum-trader indicated ‘things are changing because our coconut palms are no longer highly productive. People no longer pluck every 45–50 days; they wait more than 2 months before plucking. They do not maintain the coconut palms by cutting the leaves or cleaning the tops, nor do they till and fertilise. Labour problems make it unprofitable for farmers.’ The period between harvesting coconuts is commonly extended. Either pluckers are not immediately available, or farmers want to reduce labour costs. Farmers delay the harvest by plucking mature coconut bunches every 55–60 days, rather than the recommended interval of 45 days during the main season. In turn, biological production of coconuts adjusts to the rhythm of plucking. This strategy reduces labour costs by decreasing the number of times a coconut palm is harvested per year.

Plucking labour is casual and mainly engaged by farmers, while a minority are hired by traders. Traditional pluckers are from the Thandan community and classified by the Government of Kerala as Scheduled Caste. True to their traditional occupation (see Government of India, 1961; Singh, 2002b) Thandans still cut coconut leaves (for thatched roofing, death beds, decorating temples during a festival), fell coconut palms and pluck tender coconut for Abishekam (ceremonial bathing of temple idols). Pluckers engage in patronage relations, but these ties are weaker than the past (see, for example Nair and Adoor, 1986; Varghese, 1970). One plucker-cum-trader told us, ‘right now I have 300 households, I am like a family member. If I said I was migrating to the Gulf, this would be akin to killing the family . . . .’ One plucker we interviewed indicated, ‘[i]n olden days pluckers were sincere . . . . In the past, landowners gave me respectable wages for my sincerity. Now all castes climb and pluck, but they do not know how to do the work properly. I plucked for temple lands and plucked tender coconuts for Abishekam; I mainly worked for large landowners, Ezhavas and Nairs.’

Although agricultural labour is typically viewed as unskilled, Thandan pluckers were described as skilled for their knowledge in coconut palm maintenance, including recognition and treatment of disease. Unskilled pluckers are those belonging to other Scheduled Caste communities. We were told marginal farmers are turning to unskilled pluckers because they accept a lower wage than the Thandans, and it is becoming more difficult to access skilled labour when required. Skilled pluckers exercise resilience by
mainly working for farmers with larger landholdings and refusing to work for households with only a few coconut palms. Furthermore, Thandans sometimes contract unskilled pluckers to help with their work, paying them a portion of the wage.

In contrast, crops in Palakkad are cultivated with higher intensity, and coconut, mango and paddy are major crops. Approximately 50% of the area under coconut cultivation in the district is irrigated (Ecostat, 2010). Regardless of state land reforms (1970), landowners (present and absentee) have been able to maintain ownership of large landholdings (e.g. 40–60 acres) by circumventing legislated ceilings (see Herring, 1983; Oommen, 1971; Varghese, 1970) through illegal property titles. Yet, large-scale coconut production is relatively new in Palakkad. Coconut cultivation, processing and trade have expanded over the last 35 years in response to difficulties faced in paddy production. This switch away from paddy (and tapioca), mainly to coconut and rubber, occurred across Kerala between 1975–1976 and 1995–1996 (Government of India, 2008). Farmers and traders told us remuneration from paddy had declined and farmers began to switch to coconut, mainly out of concern for their ability to access and control labour. One local government official indicated ‘paddy is decreasing and being replaced by coconut. This is because of the labour shortage, a major constraint to production, coupled with inadequate location-specific harvesting equipment.’ Labourers are unwilling to work at the low wages provided, are pursuing less arduous work (e.g. factories, textile shops) and are no longer as flexible with their time (see Véron, 1999, pp. 101–104).

Plucking labour is mainly organised under coconut or copra traders or traders-cum-millers. Farmers with smaller landholdings mainly use their coconuts for their own household consumption and have difficulty accessing pluckers when needed, at times waiting 2 or more weeks. Large traders secure access to larger farms through pre-harvest loans interlocked with post-harvest sales. (It is important to note, many of the larger traders are large landowners and farmers, yet not all large landholders are traders.) Harvesting labour costs and transportation are deducted from payment to farmers. For traders this ensures access to coconuts in a highly competitive market, while farmers obtain needed cash loans, particularly during the rainy season.

The spatial unit for labour

To ensure regular access to pluckers the spatial unit of labour is socially structured within both panchayats, but they differ in the ways they are organised. Our surveys and interviews reveal that labour in Thiruvananthapuram is solely derived from the local area, whereas local and migrant labour are used in Palakkad.

Unskilled pluckers in Thiruvananthapuram mainly reside in the Scheduled Caste colonies (spatially segregated residential areas), while skilled Thandans...
dan pluckers live outside them. Though pluckers are casual labourers, work is spatially organised through their status as skilled pluckers versus unskilled pluckers. Skilled pluckers hold a larger area and number of households under their control with more permanent ties to their employers, while unskilled pluckers are limited in the areas they can work. While many farmers we talked to prefer to hire Thandans, some of these pluckers also exercise resilience by controlling specific areas of the panchayat. They do so by refusing to work if their employers hire unskilled pluckers. For example, one Scheduled Caste plucker told us ‘people outside the colony do not call me for plucking. If I pluck outside the colony the Thandan will tell the landowner “last time you called that guy, so you should always call him . . . ,” so they do not like to call me’. Some of the unskilled pluckers indicated this is why they have a lower number of working days per year and work for only a few households within and adjacent to the colony. Thus, not only is labour regulated by employers, but also by labour itself.

Most of the labour in Palakkad is drawn from the local colony. Labourers include migrants from the neighbouring state of Tamil Nadu, many of whom have settled in the colony over the last 25 years, obtaining residency in Kerala. Although many of the Tamil migrants have permanently settled in the panchayat, they hold a socially inferior position to Malayalee community members living in the colony. Ethnicity is used to further segment and control the labour market. This does not influence the wage received for plucking, though it does for toddy tapping. The different wages for toddy tapping are justified through traditional tapping techniques that vary between Tamil and Malayalee tappers. We were told by Malayalee tappers and toddy traders that the Malayalee tapping technique, and resulting quality of toddy, were superior to Tamil tapping. Toddy traders pay Tamil tappers (whether migrant or resident) a wage that is at least half that received by Malayalee tappers. This wage difference encourages some Tamil community members to work as pluckers.

Traders meet local pluckers in the early morning at the tea shop on the edge of the colony to inform them of their work for the day. This is because higher castes typically avoid entering the colony. Pluckers also work in nearby villages because many of the traders purchase and harvest coconuts from farms outside the panchayat. When pluckers have to travel they are provided transportation or their employers compensate them for their bus fare. During the high season for coconut production larger traders engage labourers living along the border in Tamil Nadu. The seasonal migrant pluckers exercise resilience by demanding wages higher than the local rate. Traders heed their requests paying over Rs 500/10,000 coconuts per plucking group (or Rs 100 above the common rate) to maximise the number of coconuts harvested per day. This is particularly telling of the local labour shortage. The need for immediate access to labour allows migrant pluckers to negotiate a
better wage than local labour.

The proximity of Palakkad to Tamil Nadu, their integrated markets and its historical and ethnic ties to Kerala shape both labour recruitment and the types and conditions of contracts. Traders from Palakkad indicated labour contracts are similar to those in Tamil Nadu. One prominent trader-cum-coconut oil processor explained that this is one reason why they vehemently oppose any coconut labour union in the panchayat: ‘The labourers tried to start a union with the help of local politicians, so some traders collaborated to stop it . . . . If there is a union this would create a difference between here and Tamil Nadu. Traders there would be able to produce at a lower cost and sell coconut oil even more cheaply (than us).’ Our own field visit to Kangeyam, a large copra processing centre in Tamil Nadu, did reveal similarities. But coconut labour in Kangeyam is more tightly controlled through the prevalent use of indebted migrant labour, housed at the copra processing units and coconut oil mills. To remain regionally competitive, particularly with Tamil Nadu, the local traders clearly have an incentive to curtail collective labour organisation and constrain individual labour agency. Traders in Palakkad aim to keep wages low, yet need to ensure they do not lose pluckers to other forms of employment (e.g. toddy tapping or factory work), or to traders from Tamil Nadu. Traders told us that they have recently begun to compete with Tamil traders for access to local coconuts and labour. To strengthen control over the labour market the traders in the local area have formed an informal association. The traders set general standards and terms of contracts, including plucking advances and wages. When pluckers attempt to negotiate with individual traders for a wage increase they are told the wages are set by the association, and thus, cannot be adjusted.

Coercion in contracts

Contracts and forms of coercion are distinctly different between Thiruvananthapuram and Palakkad. Though farmers in Thiruvananthapuram have been extending the coconut harvest to reduce labour costs, pluckers continue to work full-time during the main season. Wage rates paid by farmers for plucking average Rs 10–15/coconut palm, and wages are sometimes augmented with coconuts (e.g. Rs 10 plus one coconut per palm)—a wage equal to or higher than the legislated minimum (Rs 10/coconut palm) in Kerala (GoK, 2011). If a plucker works a full day for a farmer with a significant number of coconut palms, their wage will further be augmented in kind (e.g. food, tea). To limit their risk of injury, some Thandan pluckers exercise resilience by refusing to pluck during the rainy season when the coconut palms are slippery and moss-covered. Pluckers and farmers told us Thandans are able to demand and receive a higher wage from farmers who informally call them at the last minute, and refuse to carry out coconut palm maintenance—all forms of resilience. One skilled plucker explained, ‘when somebody informally re-
quests my immediate services, and I am not a regular plucker for them, I ask for Rs 20. Farmers should regularly call one person because if they call somebody informally they will only pluck the coconuts and not clean the coconut palms. If I work for somebody on a regular basis I take responsibility for every coconut bunch.’

A minority of pluckers receive payment as koiyal (coconuts in lieu of wages) from larger farmers and traders (e.g. 20 coconuts per 100 coconuts plucked). We were told this was a common local practice in the past, but the koiyal system has declined with the introduction of the wage. One woman told us that approximately 20 years ago, pluckers would receive five coconuts for every 100 coconuts plucked. Today it is more common for pluckers to receive a wage or a combined wage with coconuts. Taking advantage of the labour shortage, Thandan pluckers exercise resilience by negotiating for a combined payment, with farmers reluctantly acceding to their demands. Particularly interesting in this locality, a system that once favoured accumulation, now favours labour. This is because of declining coconut productivity and the increased value of coconuts. Many pluckers now benefit by exercising resilience through petty trade and selling coconuts to neighbours or the market. Some skilled pluckers working on a long-term basis for numerous large-scale farmers, take advantage of the value-added potential of coconuts, and engage female family labour to produce copra. Copra is either sold as is or processed into coconut oil and used for household consumption or sold in the market. Some Thandans also raise coconut seedlings to sell to farmers. Furthermore, some pluckers said if they are mistreated or receive an unfair wage, they will steal high quality coconuts or neglect to carry out palm maintenance as agreed upon. These strategies are arguably a form of resilience by contingently raising consumption. But for many of the pluckers we spoke with they appeared to be strategies of resistance (as in Katz’s (2004) case in Sudan). The Thandan pluckers spoke of consciously undercutting accumulation by stealing coconuts or diminishing productivity through inadequate palm maintenance.

In Palakkad, wages for pluckers working directly for farmers average Rs 8–10 per coconut palm, a rate lower than Thiruvananthapuram, and at times lower than the legislated minimum. Pluckers are hired separately by farmers for coconut palm maintenance. Traders pay wages on a ‘plucking group’ basis (Rs 350–425/1000 coconuts), with a group comprising four to twelve members, including pluckers, dehuskers and loaders. During the main coconut season this can translate into a daily average wage of Rs 200–250 per plucker, a maximum of Rs 500 for a strong plucker working for a large-scale trader, and Rs 80–150 for a plucker under a small trader. The lower wages and employment under traders, reflect a highly segmented and controlled labour market where pluckers’ agency is more tightly constrained than it is in Thiruvananthapuram.
In our interviews with traders and pluckers they explained that traders exert control via debt. Traders provide an advance to ensure access to labour, while pluckers practice resilience by requesting an advance to access needed capital inaccessible elsewhere. Pluckers are primarily working under two forms of modern debt bondage whereby debt is repaid from wages remitted: (1) a lump sum advance acts to solidify the work contract, and (2) an advance provided as a low daily wage when there is no work (e.g. Rs 100/day). Traders in Palakkad attempt to make labour insecure yet accessible. Contracts and debt are manipulated to ensure availability of pluckers during the high season. Some labourers continue to get a minimal wage per day from traders to ensure their availability when productivity increases. Most pluckers and traders told us pluckers, though ‘debt-tied’, were able to work independently for smaller farmers. The terms negotiated vary with some pluckers requiring permission, while others are only able to work independently when they have no work from their trader. When they work independently, pluckers also exercise resilience by calling in sick or providing other personal reasons for being unable to work for traders.

Pluckers exercise resilience by negotiating their advance (e.g. Rs 5000–10,000). They negotiate with one trader and seek alternative offers from other traders for initial advances and additional consumption and emergency loans (e.g. for medical expenses, funerals, marriage). Pluckers overwhelmingly told us that if they are unsatisfied with their trader they switch employers. For example, one plucker said ‘the traders normally give us an advance because we work for them daily. If they do not give an advance, pluckers may leave and work for another trader. Without an advance it is both difficult for the traders and the pluckers.’ If a plucker moves to a new trader, and both traders belong to the informal association, the new trader will return any debt owed to the previous employer. At times, smaller traders experience a loss if they are unable to force repayment. This ability depends on the trader’s social position, or economic and political power within the local area.

Caste and class

Caste and class are key social structures of accumulation that regulate the workforce. While various strategies of accumulation and labour control are employed by traders and farmers, these strategies remain closely linked to traditional class formation via caste.

In Thiruvananthapuram, the Thandan community’s current social position can be further understood by situating their identity politically and historically. Namely, a history of contention surrounds their classification as either a sub-caste or a caste distinct from the Ezhava (toddy tapper) community (Mathur, 1994). Particularly relevant, the Thandans traditionally enjoyed a higher social status and caste position to the Ezhavas. Ezhavas faced
severe social restrictions as a slave caste. They were classified as untouchables in accordance with tapping as one of most socially ‘polluting’ occupations (Nair and Adoor, 1986). Thandans were under less restrictions for their coconut-related work in temples. In ancient times they also worked under high caste Nair families to perform punishments against law offenders and guard the village (see Government of India, 1961; Singh, 2002b). Yet through a variety of ways, including work in coir factories and participation in social movements and the first trade unions, the Ezhava community was able to rework their identity. They were able to move caste categories (from Scheduled Caste to Other Backward Classes) and improve their class position (Kurup 1988, Chapter 6; Rajendran 1974), while Thandans were largely absent in these struggles.

Progressive change within the Ezhava community, and the controversial classification of Thandan as a distinct Scheduled Caste, has arguably contributed to the pluckers’ conscious efforts to improve their social position. As early as 1961 the Thandan community in Thiruvananthapuram city were noted as undergoing a ‘social metamorphosis’ (Government of India, 1961, p. 2). Some Thandan community members began calling themselves Thachans (a carpenter caste with a similar name) as a strategy to rework their identity. Posing as Thachans, the second generation community members were able to marry into families of another carpenter caste (Asari) outside of the city. The Thandans took on the social characteristics of the Thachans to improve their social position—a form of Sanskristation (emulating life styles and practices of upper castes (see Srinivas, 1966)). Through marriage they were able to officially change their caste to one under the Other Backward Classes classification.

More recently, our discussions with pluckers, traders, farmers and government officials in Thiruvananthapuram reveal an ongoing class struggle routed in the Thandan identity as traditional pluckers. Thandans are seeking to improve their status through educating their children and shifting to alternative employment (particularly via migration to the Persian Gulf). Many Thandans discussed their strategies to move away from plucking with specific reference to their negative social position. One plucker explained, ‘When we are coming, people say the Thandan is coming. We feel bad when we are called Thandan. Most people feel seeing a Thandan first in the day is considered bad luck, and if a Thandan is the first man coming toward us when we embark on a journey, it will be a failure. I have two daughters but if I had a son I would prefer he not become a plucker. I am educating my daughters so they can marry someone of their education level, not a plucker.’ Most of the Thandan pluckers stressed they support their children’s desire to avoid work in agriculture, even when this is at a lower wage (e.g. driving an auto-rickshaw). One Thandan plucker said, ‘although plucking is my traditional work, I will never allow my children to do it because it is difficult; my brother
died when he fell from a coconut palm. I will send my children to study if they are willing. Generally the new generation is not interested in plucking.’ This is a form of reworking as the Thandan community reaches into modern systems such as education, to change their traditional caste and class position. As Thandans move away from traditional work, other Scheduled Castes, particularly the Kuruva community, are turning to plucking. These local labour market changes have contributed to strengthening the distinction between skilled/Thandan and unskilled/non-Thandan pluckers.

In numerous discussions with farmers, traders and pluckers in Thiruvananthapuram, both the perceived and actual skill of pluckers was connected to their caste. Caste was also related to the terms of employment. Yet our interviews with pluckers reveal employers are not the only actor intent on maintaining caste-based stratification of labour. The Thandans also contribute to labour market segmentation through various (non-progressive) strategies of control locally. Thandan pluckers told us they actively restrict access to their knowledge of plucking to members of their own community. They, along with unskilled pluckers, indicated they maintain control over larger landholdings (e.g. 2–4 acres) by threatening non-Thandan pluckers and refusing to work for farmers who hire other Scheduled Castes. Some Thandans also told us the spread of coconut disease is because of the inability of unskilled pluckers to appropriately care for the palms. One skilled plucker indicated, ‘previously only Thandans did the plucking; one occupation is supposed to be for one community. There is a specific technique for plucking but now all communities pluck without knowing the correct way, they just do it for money. This is another main reason for diseased coconut palms . . . . Only our caste knows, it is our secret . . . . Just climbing a coconut palm and carrying an axe does not make somebody a plucker.’ In contrast, farmers generally blamed all pluckers for the spread of coconut disease because of their failure to maintain coconut palms appropriately.

Furthermore, in both panchayats farmers and traders emphasised pluckers’ low levels of education and their socially deviant behaviour (e.g. alcohol consumption, laziness, absenteeism). These actions are all forms of resilience, although they take a non-progressive form and can be socially destructive (see, for example Cumbers et al., 2010). For example, drinking can compromise the health of pluckers, but it also helps them cope with the physical demands of their labour.

In Palakkad, pluckers are from a variety of Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe communities. Traditional pluckers are from the Nadar caste, originally from Tamil Nadu. Possibly this is because Palakkad did not produce coconuts as a primary traditional crop and on a scale comparable to the southwestern coast. Though the labouring community is spatially segregated from the wider panchayat, this does not lead to greater cohesion between labourers. Our survey of the colony reveals a heterogeneous com-
position of caste groups along ethnic lines. Many of the Tamil colony members are from castes not under the Scheduled Caste classification (e.g. Ezhava, Gounder, Nadar, Viswakarma), yet they are labourers and live in the colony. Our discussions with colony members consistently revealed tensions between labourers originating from Tamil Nadu and those from Kerala. The heterogeneous composition of the community strengthens the segmentation and control of the workforce, making it more difficult for labour to engage in reworking and resistance strategies.

To understand these constraints to labour agency, the ongoing collective struggle of Tamil toddy tappers to unionise is particularly telling. This struggle clearly reveals significant community tension and divisive politics within the colony. While there are strong toddy tapper unions elsewhere in Kerala, primarily for the Ezhava caste (Nair, 2006; Raveendran, 1992), there are none in the Palakkad panchayat. Both Tamil tappers who are permanent residents in Kerala, and those who are migrants from Tamil Nadu, receive approximately three-quarters of the wage received by Ezhava tappers (e.g. approximately Rs 2/l toddy versus Rs 7/l). Concerted effort to form a union for the Tamil tappers has been met with social pressure, death threats and physical violence against the movement’s leaders and their families. Scheduled Caste colony members are periodically enlisted by toddy contractors through bribery (with liquor and money) and coercion to intimidate the leaders of the movement. We discussed this conflict with two leaders of the movement, both Tamil toddy tappers belonging to the Ezhava community and living in the colony. Our in-depth discussion took place at their request a few days after their house was ransacked and one of them left near the colony water pump after being badly beaten. We were told ‘the contractors, with the help of politicians, paid money to some goondas [hired thugs] to intimidate and attack us; the politicians never show their involvement in public. The [Scheduled Caste] people from the colony do not have any education or wisdom, they do anything for money, so they obeyed them. Over the last 20 years we have unsuccessfully been trying to start a union.’ This struggle for Tamil tappers to collectively organise demonstrates some of the structural constraints labourers face when employing resistance strategies.

Similarly, recent attempts by pluckers to organise collectively and form a union have been unsuccessful. (There are unions in other locations in Kerala, including one panchayat adjacent to the study area.) During our interviews with traders, farmers and pluckers, they recounted that the most recent labour-initiated movement was in 2006. Pluckers living in the colony stopped work to lobby for a union. The traders engaged farmers to collaborate and coerce labour to cease their demands and resume work. Farmers threatened the pluckers stating they would not allow unionised labour to harvest coconuts from their land. The pluckers have yet to renew their collective pursuit to organise. Primarily, they have been unable to garner polit-
ical support, they are unable to cooperate collectively, and they do not have a strong leader. One plucker told us ‘if we start a union we need a strong leader to manage everything, but we do not have anyone . . . .’ Another indicated, ‘I would like to start a union, but we need help from politicians. The people in the colony had planned to form a union but they could not cooperate with each other.’ We were also told local politicians threaten traders with unionisation as a means to extract party ‘contributions’. One influential trader-cum-coconut oil processor told us ‘the local politicians create union problems to increase membership to their parties. Normally these issues are not serious in this area. If party members ask for a donation, and I do not heed their demands, they cause problems for me; they do this to any wealthy man.’ These financial and political ties between local politicians, large-scale farmers and traders (also structured by caste and class) strengthen control over labour.

Locally constituted labour dynamics

Labour markets in Kerala are socially structured and ‘locally constituted’. There are clear regional differences in the ways coconut pluckers are organised and regulated through key social structures (space, caste, class, ethnicity). These structures shape labour–land relations, production relations, labour control strategies (e.g. coercion and debt-based contracts) and the ability of labour to act. A simplistic explanation of the labour shortage (based on neoclassical economic models) overlooks the articulations between structure and agency. Functions of supply and demand do not account for regional differences rooted in historical, political–economic processes and geography, nor can they explicitly identify issues around labour control and social regulation. There is arguably a ‘labour shortage’ in both study locations, but the local dynamics vary with place (Table 3.1).
**Table 3.1: Locally constituted labour dynamics: Social regulation and labour agency in Thiruvananthapuram and Palakkad, Kerala.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Thiruvananthapuram</th>
<th>Palakkad</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>**Labour–land and produc-</td>
<td>More capitalist</td>
<td>Semi-feudal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tion relations**</td>
<td>Small, fragmented landholdings, low intensity production, mainly rain-fed</td>
<td>Large landholdings, high intensity production, mainly irrigated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Decline in coconut productivity</td>
<td>Expansion of coconut production, processing and trade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coconut increasing as subsistence crop</td>
<td>Coconut increasing as commercial crop</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Casual labour, mainly hired by farmers</td>
<td>Casual labour, mainly working under traders/traders-cum-millers and hired by individual small farmers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategies to reduce labour costs:</td>
<td>extend harvest period, limit coconut palm maintenance and inputs, inconsistent replanting of coconut palms</td>
<td>Traders control access to coconut plantations via loans interlocked with post-harvest sales</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Weak patronage relations</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Caste and class</strong></td>
<td>Thandan caste (skilled)</td>
<td>Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes: local, non-traditional pluckers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other Scheduled Castes (unskilled) (e.g. Kuruvan)</td>
<td>Other Backward Classes: originating from Tamil Nadu (Ezhava, Gounder, Nadar, Viswakarma)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Spatial unit for labour</strong></td>
<td>Local labour from Thandan caste mainly living in wider panchayat, and others from Scheduled Caste colony</td>
<td>Local labour from Scheduled Caste colony</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Migrant labour from border in Tamil Nadu</td>
<td>Migrant labour from border in Tamil Nadu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Spatial unit for labour</strong></td>
<td>Integrated market with Tamil Nadu; historical ethnic ties shape labour recruitment and contracts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Coercion in contracts</strong></td>
<td>Wage equal to or above legislated minimum, payment in kind</td>
<td>Farmers provide wage below legislated minimum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thandans refuse to work for households with only a few coconut palms</td>
<td>Traders provide wage to team of labourers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thandans control access to work by refusing to work for farmers that hire unskilled pluckers</td>
<td>Informal trader association to control local labour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thandans refuse to pluck during the rainy season and to maintain coconut palms</td>
<td>Traders control labour via debt-based contracts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thandans negotiate for combined payment (wage and coconut) and higher wage</td>
<td>Tamil migrants lobby for wage above local rate during high season</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pluckers engage in value-added production and petty trade</td>
<td>Pluckers call in sick or provide other personal reasons when they work independently for farmers</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Pluckers engage in socially deviant behaviour</td>
<td>Pluckers request an advance</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Pluckers engage in socially deviant behaviour</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Reworking</strong></td>
<td>Thandans use education to change caste and class position</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Resistance</strong></td>
<td>Pluckers steal high quality coconuts</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Thandans diminish coconut productivity through inadequate palm maintenance</td>
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Furthermore, while traders and farmers exert substantial control over labour, pluckers also regulate themselves socially through a variety of strategies, although not always through progressive action. It is thus inadequate to refer to ‘unorganised’ labour. This term masks the various ways labour is socially structured and regulates itself, albeit in small ways. Particularly significant is the ability of Thandans to recalibrate power relations in an attempt to address historical and geographical forms of caste- and class-based oppression. They are actively reworking their terms of employment and their social position by reaching into modern systems of class formation (e.g. education and shifting occupations). Interestingly, Thandans also act to regulate the labour market through coercive control of unskilled Scheduled Caste pluckers. The Thandan pluckers, through their traditional occupational status, and their ability to leverage their social position within the wider Scheduled Caste community, control access to work. This strengthens labour market segmentation, and at the same time, diminishes farmers’ ability to control labour. While effective strategies for the Thandans, these strategies are neither transformative or progressive (see also, Carswell and Neve, 2013), but they do influence the local labour market.

3.9 Conclusion

This paper began with the intent to contribute to identified gaps and recent research trajectories in labour geography, and to uncover the complexity of labour dynamics within the Kerala coconut industry. Focus on the individual actions of ‘unorganised’ agricultural labour in a developing economy contributes empirically and conceptually to the literature. This paper shows: (1) local labour markets are socially and spatially structured and their regulation varies with geographical, historical and political-economic processes in particular places; (2) unorganised labour, though its agency is constrained, is able to regulate itself socially and informally, albeit in small ways; (3) a structural approach is important to situate labour agency; and (4) a carefully delineated conceptualisation of resistance provides a more comprehensive understanding of labour action.

Recognising individual and less obvious strategies of labour contributes to an improved understanding of the various forms of class struggle and resistance within a socially structured workforce. Coupling Harriss-White’s (2003) SSA framework and Katz’s (2004) work on agency is a useful approach to conceptualise these issues. This provides another way forward for labour geographers interested in the struggles and actions of ‘unorganised’ labour in a context where informal labour and social regulation prevail. Situating agency and structure historically, while recognising how structure in particular contexts conditions resilience, reworking and resistance, allows for a nuanced understanding of labour dynamics. In this way, this paper attends
to Coe and Jordhus-Lier’s (2011, p. 228) argument that ‘if labour geography is to offer researchers a better analytical framework – one which can explain why some workers’ actions seem to matter more than others – a more sophisticated understanding of the structural constraints and social relations that shape labour’s agency potential is required. Notwithstanding the significance of the efforts to ‘reclaim’ labour agency from the grip of capital, we want to encourage the re-embedded understanding of this concept we see emerging in the field of labour geography.’

Furthermore, this paper shows that the governments’ understanding of the ‘coconut crisis’ in Kerala glosses over significant processes of labour market change. A more nuanced understanding reveals that labour difficulties vary by place, and are linked to changing labour-land and production relations and processes reworking structures of labour control. Thus, simple policy solutions such as training programmes for pluckers and the use of mechanical plucking devices (see CACP, 2010 Ittyipe, 2011), may not be enough to address the ‘labour shortage’.

### 3.10 Acknowledgements

I am especially thankful for the cooperation of the many people (labourers, farmers, traders, government officials) that took the time to engage in lengthy discussions. I am grateful for the research assistance provided, and honesty and flexibility shown by Jithin Raj in the field. The Centre for Development Studies, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala deserves recognition for their logistical support and pivotal access to resources. I am truly grateful for the unwavering advisory support provided by René Véron throughout the research process, and his intellectual contributions to this paper. I sincerely appreciate the constructive comments provided by Alice Hovorka and Craig Johnson. Fellow India scholars provided invaluable guidance and insight that helped shape this paper. The detailed comments by four anonymous referees and attentive editorial assistance contributed to a stronger manuscript. The research was funded through the SSHRC project ‘The Restructuring of Social Space: globalisation, Reform and Livelihoods in India’ conducted at the University of Guelph, Canada (2005–2009), and a Ph.D. India Studies Research Fellowship from the Shastri Indo-Canadian Institute (2007–2008).
Diverging developments: Livelihood dynamics in the coconut economy of Kerala

4.1 Abstract

The Governments of Kerala and India indicate that a coconut crisis has left up to 3.5 million farmers’ livelihoods vulnerable. But there have been no local-level studies to this end. This paper explores this oversight by examining livelihood reorientation and outcomes within two regions in Kerala. Through a detailed account of livelihood dynamics, the research contributes to the growing body of critical, placed-based studies on globalisation in rural areas. Insights are primarily drawn from detailed household- and individual-level survey data augmented by in-depth semi-structured interviews. This finding juxtaposes the national and state governments’ explanation of uniform effects on farmers (while neglecting labourers and traders) and on coconut production and processing across Kerala. Of particular relevance for policy, coconut-based livelihood strategies and outcomes vary across Kerala. Differences can be explained through the political-economic history, social structures and geography of a region.

4.2 Introduction

The Government of Kerala (2003a) has indicated that the coconut economy of the state experienced a crisis after a price decline in 2000. The crisis has been linked to agricultural liberalisation (1995) which led to substantial market, and agricultural change to edible oil pricing and production in India (Chand et al., 2004; Gulati and Narayanan, 2007; Shiva, 2000). Particularly important for Kerala are increasing palm oil imports. Concerns over palm oil flood-
ing the Indian market are connected to its properties as a replacement for coconut oil and as a cheaper alternative (Government of India, 2008; Harilal, 2010). Recently, concern has been expressed about increasing vulnerabilities to the local economy that may follow expanding trade agreements with other coconut growing countries in South Asia. It is argued that these issues are critical to the sustainability of coconut production and processing in the state (Harilal, 2010), with acute implications for 3.5 million farmers (CACP, 2007; KSPB, 2004).

The Governments of Kerala and India indicate that coconut remains an important crop for livelihood security (Government of Kerala, 2003a; Government of India, 2008) and is the ‘main stay’ of farmers in the state (KSPB, 2012). Because of the perennial nature of coconut production, rapid adjustments to market change are difficult, and may leave livelihoods highly exposed to price fluctuations. The government has expressed the need for ‘systematic analysis’ of the impacts of agricultural liberalisation on production, livelihood security and ecological resources at the national and state levels. Their hope is to develop a ‘planned transition towards a more open and equitable trading environment’ (Government of Kerala, 2003a, p. 37). This recommendation along with local empirical studies on coconut-related livelihoods have yet to be fulfilled.

This paper takes its cue from this discrepancy and provides an empirical contribution to current research on the coconut economy of Kerala. If farmers are particularly vulnerable to coconut market change and the ‘crisis’, it is important to assess livelihood portfolios to determine the importance of farming as a contribution to the household. With respect to research on labour market change in Kerala, particularly labour shortages linked to changing aspirations within agricultural labouring communities (Kannan 1999, p. 143; Thomas 2003; Véron 1999), an important question arises: were ‘farmers’ affected by a crisis in the coconut economy or did they contribute to this ‘crisis’ by shifting away from coconut production? Are farmers undergoing a process of livelihood transition similar to the Thandan pluckers of Thiruvananthapuram (Sportel, 2013), and other community groups in Kerala?

Furthermore, while the government has recognised the vulnerability of marginal and small-scale farmers, they fail to acknowledge that farming may not be a primary livelihood activity. To explain particular livelihood outcomes analysis need to be cognisant that fixed notions of ‘worker’, ‘peasant’, ‘trader’, ‘employed’ and ‘self-employed’ may be inadequate (Bernstein, 2007, p. 7). Thus this research contends that referring to ‘farmers’ as coconut producers is more appropriate since many ‘farmers’ engage in additional livelihood activities, and farming may not be their primary livelihood source. When considering vulnerability, all marginal and small-scale ‘farmers’ may not be poor, and the poorest within a community may not be ‘farmers’.

To determine livelihood dynamics and change within the coconut eco-
nomy this paper explores livelihood activities of coconut producers. The discussion is guided by two questions: (1) which producers, based on community groups, follow what livelihood activities, and (2) how have their livelihood activities changed. The paper explores these issues within two regions in Kerala. A comparative analysis is used to explore possible regional variation in livelihood and agrarian change. Such an analysis across space is relevant to both micro- and macro-level policy (Ellis, 2000). The way space is structured is a key determinant of diverging developments and livelihood trajectories in the study regions. This finding juxtaposes the national and state governments’ explanation of uniform effects on ‘farmers’ and on coconut production and processing across Kerala. Differences can be explained through the political-economic history, social structures and geography of the regions. In this way, the paper demonstrates the importance of moving beyond notions of ‘context’ to develop a more critical understanding. Through a detailed account of livelihood dynamics, the research also contributes to the growing body of critical local studies on agrarian change and livelihoods in rural areas (e.g. Rigg and Vandergeest, 2012).

The remainder of the paper is organised into six parts. The following section situates this research within the rural livelihoods and agrarian change literature, while emphasizing the importance of social structures. This is followed by the methodology and a description of the study regions. Third, a discussion of the historical and contemporary situation as it relates to coconut production is provided. The paper moves into a detailed discussion of livelihood dynamics within two different regions in Kerala, followed by a conclusion.

### 4.3 Rural livelihoods and agrarian change

A livelihood is commonly seen to comprise the ‘assets (natural, physical, human, financial and social capital), the activities, and the access to these (mediated by institutions and social relations) that together determine the living gained by the individual or household’ (Ellis, 2000, p. 10). The livelihoods approach can capture the dynamic, historical, and relational processes that inform ‘the diverse ways people make a living and build their worlds’ (Bebbington, 1999, p. 2021). It provides a means to link macro-level processes to micro-level outcomes and responses, and a useful way to study globalisation processes at the local level (see for example de Haan, 2000; Oberhauser et al., 2004; Rankin, 2003; Rigg and Vandergeest, 2012). The approach provides a way to counter unilinear macro-economic approaches dominant within development enquiry, and to pursue complex analyses of dynamic rural contexts (Scoones, 2009).

Yet livelihoods studies have been critiqued for their tendency to overlook social structures by conceptualizing them solely as ‘context’ (O’Laughlin,
Neglecting social structures and processes through which sustainable livelihoods are achieved, is limiting (Scoones, 1998); livelihood activities engender processes of inclusion and exclusion (de Haan and Zoomers, 2005). Work within the development literature has attempted to bring politics in, but it has primarily been through tweaking various frameworks. This has lead to an approach that primarily treats politics as an additional capital or correlated with ‘social capital’ as a way to represent power relations (see Scoones, 2009). These additions are inadequate in the ways they represent complex intersections between social relations/structural processes. As O’Laughlin (2004) argues, this is because the approach provides good methods without a solid meta-theory. Perhaps this is because the livelihoods approach is non-ideological . . . (de Haan and Zoomers, 2005).

While livelihoods research has addressed issues around economic globalisation, agrarian transition, poverty and rural livelihood dynamics (see Rigg, 2006), explicit attention to the structural processes in particular places that drive agrarian change are absent. A growing body of critical studies within the agrarian change literature does provide detailed case studies, including a historical understanding, on the relationships between poverty, diversification and agrarian transition. Recent work has focused on change over time and the unexpected ways people have diversified and their livelihoods and shifted to alternative work, particularly via migration to urban areas (see Rigg and Vandergeest, 2012). Research has centred on the various livelihood strategies of different community groups, primarily based on class (see for example Borras, 2009; Hirsch, 2012; Li, 2012; Razavi, 2003; Wittayapak, 2012) through a political-economic approach. These discussions provide important insight on the ways in which different classes experience agrarian change.

Yet, there remains limited attention to the reasons for these differences. Why, for example is a poor household unable to diversify their livelihoods to the same extent as a wealthy household? Why do agricultural labourers have more limited opportunities to improve their social position and move away from insecure wage labour? As O’Laughlin (2004, p. 387) argues: ‘class, not as an institutional contextual variable, but as a relational concept, is absent from the discourse of livelihoods. Accordingly political space is very limited — focusing mainly on ‘empowering’ the poor, without being clear about how this process takes place or who might have to be ‘disempowered’ for it to occur’. These questions, at the very least, require explicit recognition that structure matters, that basic questions of political economy and history matter. This would be a solid step forward.

If political economy and history matter in particular places, it makes sense to explicitly consider space both in terms of bio-physical or geographical space and as a social structure (see Harriss-White, 2003; Sportel, 2013). Conceptualising space as a social structure follows Harriss-White’s formulation
of the social structures of accumulation (SSA) approach, which was originally developed by Gordon et al. (1982). Her analysis on the ways in which social structures regulate production and accumulation in small-town India was the first to explicitly include space within an SSA framework. Harriss-White (2003) argues economic activity takes place in specific places and forms spatial patterns that influence the outcomes of specific activities. She emphasizes the importance of the formation of economic clusters, and the ways they are informed by historical evolution of agricultural structure and caste distribution in particular regions in India (Harriss-White, 2003). Enhanced attention to how local livelihoods are socially structured (e.g. class, caste, gender, space) would help move analyses beyond an actor-oriented approach (see, for example Bernstein et al., 1992; Kelly, 2012; Li, 2012; McCusker and Carr, 2006; Nygren and Myatt-Hirvonen, 2009).

To understand agrarian/rural change necessitates questioning who owns what, who does what, who gets what and what they do with it (Bernstein et al., 1992, p. 24), in addition to why particular groups access particular opportunities. This approach can address shortcomings in livelihoods studies, which have tended to conceptualise livelihood production in aspatial and overly materialist ways. It is particularly important to recognise that livelihoods trajectories and social relations are shaped by historical and contemporary geographies (King, 2011; McCusker and Carr, 2006); ‘livelihoods are inherently spatial’ (King, 2011, p. 297). King (2011, p. 298) argues that ‘spatialising livelihoods is needed in order to examine how livelihood systems are embedded in socio-spatial articulations that are constructed and reconstructed over time.’ Particularly important for this paper is a consideration that macro-economic policies (e.g. agricultural liberalisation) may not have a direct affect (or one-to-one relationship) on the local economy and livelihoods. Policy outcomes may differ across space whereby regional variation in agrarian structure and social change result in different livelihood trajectories across space.

4.4 Methodology and the study regions

To explore regional variation in livelihood strategies, reorientations and outcomes within Kerala the research was designed as a comparative case study between two gram panchayats (local political-administrative units covering one or more villages). The gram panchayats are located in two different taluks (sub-districts): Chirayinkeezhu Taluk, Thiruvananthapuram District, and Chittur Taluk, Palakkad District (Figure 4.1). They were selected for their varied geography, agro-ecology and political-economic history.

Thiruvananthapuram, located in the sea-side southern low- and midlands, is settled in a very dense, but relatively dispersed pattern (referred to as ‘rurban’, (Sreekumar, 1990)) typical of this area of Kerala. Ecologically,
the panchayat is located in the Malabar Coast moist forests ecoregion. Geographically distinct for its undulating topography and water/land patchwork pattern. Palakkad panchayat resides in the mid-lands and the Palghat Gap, a mountain pass in the Western Ghats, and adjacent to the Tamil Nadu border. It differs geographically through its predominantly rural character and flat landscape. The panchayat is located within two ecoregions: the Southwestern Ghats moist deciduous forests and the Southwestern Ghats montane rain forests (Figure 4.1). The climate in Palakkad and Chittur Taluks is drier than others areas in Kerala, more closely resembling that of Tamil Nadu (Government of Kerala, 2003b; Olson et al., 2001). Agriculture, particularly coconut cultivation, is an important contribution to livelihoods in both panchayats. But the scale and intensity of production varies.

Agricultural development in the two regions has been significantly shaped by their different political-economic histories (Varghese, 1970). Particularly important the panchayats belonged to two different political administrations before the formation of Kerala state (1956). Thiruvananthapuram was part of Travancore-Cochin (central and south Kerala), while Palakkad was part of Malabar (north Kerala). Previously Thiruvananthapuram District was part of the princely state of erstwhile Travancore. This state was under indirect control by the British via treaties until Indian Independence (1947) (Menon, 2003). Social reforms and capitalistic development occurred earlier in Travancore, infrastructure investment, education and a Proclamation legally abolishing slavery (1854). Owner-cultivators formed the largest agrarian class and most of the cultivated and cultivable lands were under state ownership. This facilitated early land reform (1865) in Travancore, and eased the transition to land as a marketable asset. Capitalism infiltrated agriculture more deeply than elsewhere in Kerala. In contrast, the paddy regions of south Malabar are characterised by an agrarian structure with high insecurity and inequality in tenure. Malabar was directly controlled by the British under the Madras Presidency (provincial administrative division). However their policies enforced landlord control and feudal relations, where the largest agrarian classes comprised landless labourers and tenants (see Herring, 1983, pp. 153–179; Nair and Adoor, 1986; Varghese, 1970).

To conduct comparative research within these two different regions the research methods remained consistent. Field study was conducted during seventeen months (two extensive trips in 2007 and 2008, two short revisits in 2009 and 2010), and centred on an in-depth household survey. At times discussions moved beyond the survey questions. A combination of informal and semi-structured interviews augmented the survey data and additional details and observations were recorded. The work was primarily conducted in Malayalam with some surveys and discussions in English and Tamil. Summary interpretations were provided in the field by local research assistants.

The survey (Appendix B) was designed to capture household details (demo-
Figure 4.1: Map of the study locations and ecoregions of Kerala, India. Ecoregions are defined by Olson et al. (2001).

graphics), livelihood activities, livelihood sources, assets and community affiliations with specific focus on the coconut industry. Vulnerability and change was assessed over a five-ten year period. This time frame was chosen to capture possible livelihood change and vulnerability caused by the purported coconut ‘crisis’ caused by declining prices in 2000. While there are between 15–20 wards in each panchayat, the study was limited to just a few. The survey was administered with the help of research assistants in six wards, three within each panchayat. Initial details on the wards were derived from discussions with local government officials and local people, and transects within the panchayat. They were chosen to reflect the socio-
economic characteristics of each panchayat, and to capture the various livelihood strategies in coconut production, processing and trade.

Data collection was based on a stratified random sample. Attempt was made to survey every third household, however this was not always possible. At times, household members would refuse to participate or they were not found at home. For those households wherein members were unreachable, three separate attempts were made to conduct the survey. If a household did not participate in the survey, the adjacent household was included instead. The sample population (17–21%) achieved is 60% of the initially anticipated 33%. To determine the actual number of households per ward proved challenging because: (1) available data is outdated (2001 census); (2) data includes additional buildings with household numbers (e.g. shed) (3) some ward boundaries changed prior to the 2004 state election; and (4) an accurate map of the panchayat is not available. Possibly some areas of the ward were missed because it was at times difficult, even through consultation with local people, to reach all households and accurately confirm ward boundaries.

Initial details on the panchayat and particular wards were derived from discussions with local government officials and local people. A tour of each panchayat was conducted through a combination of transect walks and motorcycle. The surveyed wards were chosen to reflect the social and economic characteristics of each location and to capture the various livelihood strategies in (but not limited to) coconut production, processing and trade. For example, one ward containing a Scheduled Caste colony was selected from each panchayat. This was to ensure that agricultural labourers would be adequately represented. The other two wards in each panchayat were chosen to reflect livelihood activities within the wider panchayat, and to capture a combination of coconut producers, traders and processors. The survey was pre-tested in alternative wards in each panchayat (n = 10) to ensure integrity in its design. Prior to conducting the survey, the original design was revised and more detail added to the coconut-based livelihoods section.

The household includes residents outside the immediate social unit to account for spatially dispersed contributors to household welfare (see Bruce and Lloyd, 1997). Accounting for absentee members is particularly important in Kerala because approximately 18.2% of the households include at least one emigrant, and remittances are an important livelihood source (Zachariah and Rajan, 2012). A sample population of between 17 and 21% per ward was achieved (n = 569 total households, 270 in Thiruvananthapuram and in 299 Palakkad; n = 2,711 individuals: 1353 male, 1358 female). Categorisation of landholding size is based on the Government of Kerala’s classification. However, to ease data analysis the categories were converted to acres. This is more appropriate at the household scale where landholdings are referred to in acres and cents (1/100th of an acre)1.

1In India, a cent is a measure of area and equals 1/100 acre (40.468 m²). Based on the
Diverse community groups by caste, class and religion (Hindu, Muslim, Christian) are represented (Table 1.2). The data captures a larger number of Scheduled Caste households (Thiruvananthapuram: 15%; Palakkad: 24%) than the actual proportion recorded for each panchayat. This is likely related to the explicit inclusion of one ward with a Scheduled Caste colony (while only choosing two others) to ensure representation of agricultural labourers. Decent representation of community groups by religion was achieved. At times discussions moved beyond the survey questions, and these ‘spontaneous’ interviews recorded. The interviews provide richer detail on people’s livelihood activities, change and vulnerability and helped triangulate survey responses.

4.5 Kerala, the ‘Land of Coconuts’

The name of the state, Keralam, is attributed to a derivation of nalikeram, the Sanskrit word for coconut. Though there are alternative explanations for its etymology (see Aiya, 1906, v. 1), it is this derivation that has persisted with Kerala’s official self-designation as the ‘Land of Coconuts’. The coconut palm is also referred to as kalpaka vriksham, the ‘all giving tree’ (a tree that grants boons and fulfils ones wishes), for its diverse products. It is also the official state tree. Further it is commonly held that the coconut palm does not cheat anyone, or thenga chathikkilla. These references to the coconut palm hold significance beyond simple descriptors for state identity and culture. The coconut palm has a long history supporting livelihoods in Kerala.

Historical geography and development of the coconut

The geographic origins of coconut cultivation have been traced to the southern margins of the Indian subcontinent (Kerala and Tamil Nadu) and island Southeast Asia (Gunn et al., 2011). Coconut on the Indian coast has also been traced to import from Malaysia in the middle of the first century B.C. (Kosambi, 2008). The ‘impact of the coconut palm (Cocos nucifera L.) on the history of human dispersal in the humid tropics is unparalleled in the plant kingdom’ (Gunn et al., 2011, p. 1). The importance of this can be traced to its use as a portable source of food, water, fuel and construction materials (Gunn et al., 2011). Further Kosambi (2008) argues that the dense forest on the Indian coast could not have been profitably cleared or agrarian settlement

Government of Kerala landholdings size classification, analysis of the survey data was based on the following categories: marginal < 2.5 acres; small 2.5–5 acres; semi-medium 5–10 acres; medium 10–25 acres; large > 25 acres.

2The proportion of Scheduled Castes recorded in the 1991 Census of India was 10% in Thiruvananthapuram panchayat and 15% in Palakkad panchayat. Recent data on the proportion of community groups within each panchayat is inaccessible. However, the district-wise data from the 2011 Census of India shows a similar proportion of Scheduled Castes in rural Thiruvananthapuram (12%), Palakkad (15%) and Kerala (8.5%).
possible without the coconut tree and its use as a trade crop: ‘The real cause of development of the west coast was the coconut’… it ‘forms the basis of the whole coastal economy today’ (Kosambi, 2008, p. 189). This logic perhaps imparts a technological determinism. But the connection between the coconut and agrarian development, industrialisation and international trade is undeniably significant.

In the 16th century the world demand for coir (coconut husk fibre) expanded, following the rise of European maritime powers – Kerala played an important role in its global trade. Growing international trade in coir directly led to an expansion of area under coconut cultivation (Rammohan and Sundaresan, 2003). One English East India Company official noted: ‘Of all the gifts which Providence has bestowed on the Oriental world, the coco-nut [sic] tree most deserves our notice … the husk [of the coconut] … is of the utmost importance: it is manufactured into ropes, and cordage of every kind, from the smallest twine to the largest cable, which are far more durable than that of hemp’ (Forbes, 1834, pp. 22–23). By the middle of the 19th century, various coconut products, including copra (dried coconut kernel), coir, and coconut oil, were among primary international exports (Aiya, 1906). By early 20th century coconut exports in Travancore comprised 50% of the entire exports in value (Aiya, 1906). During this period coir was the primary industry of British-led industrial development (Varghese, 1970). The importance of the coconut and its products was noted by G. T. Mackenzie, a colonial official residing in Travancore (cited in Aiya, 1906, p. 191):

I need not say that the cocoanut [sic] is the staple of Travancore, because the tree is all around us, shutting out the sky from our view … . It is the plain truth that Travancore lives on this tree. The wharves at Alleppy and Cochin are covered with the various products of the cocoanut [sic] barrels of oil, tons of kernel, bales of coir, which from these ports find their way all over the world … . Without the money obtained from this export of the cocoanut [sic] the people of Travancore could not buy from Burma the rice that keeps them alive or from Jaffna the tobacco that keeps them contented … . Each man lives under his own pepper vine and palm tree, and every traveller by boat on the lagoon has seen domestic labour at each threshold the whole family busy in severing the husk from the the nut, in spinning the fibre into yarn, in spreading the kernels in the sun to dry and in gathering the shells into a heap for fuel.

Clearly coconut has played an important role in both agricultural and industrial development, and connecting the coastal economy to the international market. Coconut and its products have a long history supporting people’s livelihoods along the coast. But what is the situation today?
Contemporary geography and development of the coconut

Today India is the second largest producer of coconuts globally (24.2%), with Indonesia (25.8%) and the Philippines (22.9%) holding the first and third place respectively (see CACP, 2012). Together the three countries account for approximately 75% of the total area under coconut cultivation and 80% of the production (Narayana et al., 2006). India is unique for its production-consumption balance. Copra and coconut oil exports are negligible and coconut oil imports are in small quantities (CACP, 2012). The majority of coconuts are used as mature nuts (45%), with copra as the primary commercial product (35% oil milling, 8% edible ball copra) and mainly used for coconut oil extraction. Coconut oil is produced for toiletry products (46%), as an edible oil (40%) and for industrial use (14%). The primary producers of milling copra are Tamil Nadu and Kerala, accounting for 93% of the total domestic production (CACP, 2012). The volume of edible coconut oil produced is important to note since its consumption is unique to Kerala.

Kerala is the primary producer of coconut in India with 42.4% of the total production, followed by Karnataka (25.7%), Tamil Nadu (25.2%) and Andhra Pradesh (8.7%) (KSPB, 2012). Coconut comprises the majority of oil seeds cultivation in Kerala (99.6%) (Ecostat, 2013). Production in Kerala has continued to decline while it has grown in other southern states; in 1960 Kerala accounted for almost 70% of the production (Narayana et al., 2006). Narayana et al. (1991) found that between 1950-51 and 1987-88 the productivity of coconuts steadily declined. The increases in production during this period were directly related to increases in the area under coconut, primarily at the expense of paddy (Government of India, 2008; Narayana et al., 1991). However the area under coconut reached its maximum in 2000-01 and since then has continued to decline (Ecostat, 2013). Further Kerala has the lowest productivity in India, a rate that is 12.3% lower than the national average (KSPB, 2011). Coconut production remains an important contribution to producer livelihoods with over 40.2% of the net cropped area (KSPB, 2012), though not necessarily as a primary activity. Various challenges (e.g. marginal and fragmented landholdings, widespread disease, ageing palms, changing socioeconomic aspirations, commoditization of land, accessibility and control of labour) contribute to the declining productivity of coconut, particularly in the southwestern districts of Kerala.

But how is coconut cultivation and productivity distributed across Kerala? If we look at the regional distribution of coconut across Kerala, it is clear that it is not a uniform activity across the state. Coconut is generally grown throughout Kerala but the area under cultivation and the productivity varies between districts. Currently Kozhikode (15.6%) and Malappuram (13.3%) have the largest area under coconut cultivation, while Wayanad district has the lowest (1.3%). Thiruvananthapuram (8.7%) and Palakkad (7.4%) districts rank 5th and 6th respectively (Ecostat, 2013). Looking at the changes
in area under coconut cultivation in all districts of Kerala provides interesting insight. Particularly relevant, Palakkad is the only district that has experienced a significant increase (973 ha/year, \( p = 0.0009 \)) in the area of coconut production (2000–2012), whereas most other districts including Thiruvananthapuram (−213 ha/year, \( p < 0.0001 \)) experienced a decline (see Figure 4.2).

Recognizing that district size also varies, recent coconut productivity data provides a more complete understanding of regional differences in coconut cultivation. Malappuram (8670 coconuts/ha), Kasaragode (8515 coconuts/ha), Pathanamthitta (8465 coconuts/ha) and Palakkad (8145 coconuts/ha) districts have the highest productivity, with Wayanad having the lowest (4565 coconuts/ha). Coconut productivity in Thiruvananthapuram falls in the mid-range ranking 6th (7378 coconut/ha) out of all districts – a similar rate to the Kerala average (7235 coconuts/ha) (Ecostat, 2013). Thus, productivity does not necessarily

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3 Data on area under coconut production was compiled from the Department of Economics and Statistics, Government of Kerala, to calculate the average change in area under coconut production by district (1971–72 to 2011–12). Linear regressions of the yearly data of area under coconut production in each district were conducted in R.

4 Data on the area under coconut cultivation and the total number of coconuts produced
coincide with area under cultivation. The differences in productivity and
cultivation across the districts, and the change in area under cultivation post-
2000, reveals that feasibly the importance of coconut to the livelihoods of
‘farmers’ may also vary across Kerala. Further, livelihood outcomes may be
differentially influenced by the coconut ‘crisis’, and coconut market change
in general.

4.6 Coconut production and labour–land relations

Coconut is a perennial crop for commercial and subsistence use in Kerala.
There are two distinct varieties, tall and dwarf, which produce wide variation
through cross pollination (e.g. height and colour, shape and size of coconut).
The tall coconut palm is a hardy variety, growing to a height of 15–18 metres
and living for 80–90 years, although productivity declines over time. Tall
coco#n palms commence production 6–8 years after planting. Under optimal
growing conditions the average yield is 60–80 coconuts per palm per year.
This palm produces coconuts particularly good for copra and coconut oil,
for which Kerala is attributed with quality production. The West Coast Tall
varietal is commonly grown in India, particularly on the southern coast. It
is referred to as the ‘ordinary’ or traditional variety. Coconut palms have a
unique seasonality whereby coconuts are produced on a predictable schedule
and year-round. They mature within 12 months with new bunches (ideal for
copra and coconut oil) ready for harvesting every 45–60 days according to the
season. Delaying the harvest, delays new production (see Thampan,
1993).

These attributes have important implications for the productivity of coconut
palms.

The cyclical and perennial nature of coconut production requires a labour-
force in the vicinity, that can be used as and when required. Ensuring access
to plucking labour requires certain incentives or bonds that control labour
and regulate the workforce (Sportel, 2013). These strategies vary by region,
reflecting political–historical social structures and their relations (see, for ex-
ample Nair and Adoor, 1986; Oommen, 1971, 1984; Singh, 2002a; Varghese,
1970). Within Kerala many occupations are primarily structured through
caste ideology. The Scheduled Castes, or the ‘untouchables’ (those con-
sidered polluting by touch or proximity), who together with the Scheduled
Tribes, are the most socially excluded communities. Generally, the labour
performed by a particular community reflects their social position within
society. These social divisions explicitly separate agricultural labourers from
other community groups, including coconut producers and processors. Caste
restrictions and the negative social connotations attached to agricultural work
make it undesirable for higher caste communities (e.g. Nair, Pillai) to labour
in agriculture. Therefore, these coconut producers will hire labour to pluck coconuts, even if they only have a few palms. It is important to note that the division of land ownership, and therefore the number of coconut palms, is primarily along caste lines.

Regardless of state land reforms, relatively large landowners are from more socially respected community groups (e.g. Nairs, Pillai, Gounder, Christians, Muslims). Some traditional landlords have been able to maintain ownership of large landholdings (e.g. 40–60 acres) by circumventing legislated ceilings through illegal property titles (see Herring, 1983; Oommen, 1971; Varghese, 1970). The actual tillers/labourers, which the land reforms claimed to support, received at most minuscule landholdings (Franke and Chasin, 1994; Herring, 1983; Oommen, 1993; Törnquist and Tharakan, 1995). Many Scheduled Caste community members (those of the original slave and agricultural labouring castes) (see Nair and Adoor, 1986) have been provided up to 4 cents of land. This allows for a small house (typically with a tiled or thatched roof) and possibly a marginal homestead with one coconut palm. Majority of households have marginal holdings (< 2.5 acres) and cultivate small homestead gardens. Particularly in southwestern Kerala these plots are where most the coconuts are grown. While many have gained access to an important asset, these landholdings are too small to support agricultural production as a primary livelihood contribution.

4.7 Livelihood dynamics in Thiruvananthapuram, the ‘Mini Gulf’

The name of Thiruvananthapuram, a culturally significant district for Hindus within Kerala, is said to derive from Thiru Ananda Puram, ‘the abode of the the sacred snake-God Ananthan’. While the panchayat and surrounding area is known locally as the ‘Mini Gulf’. This monicker relates to the number of emigrants to countries in the Persian Gulf. Despite the importance of migrant remittances and service-sector activities, about 60% of the population was recorded to derive (a part of their) income in 2001 from agriculture and allied activities, with 20 ha under cultivation (KSPB, 2002). Historically important, the panchayat was a frontier for erstwhile Travancore, on an important backwaters (a chain of brackish lagoons and lakes) and coastal transportation route (KSPB, 2002), and played an important role in processes of social reform.

Coconut trees have been grown here for generations, on homesteads and small groves covering a large proportion of the landscape (see Section 4.5). Thiruvananthapuram panchayat is relatively ‘typical’ of the district and of

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5Legislated reforms (1970) were spear-headed by the Communist-led government within Kerala. These reforms resulted in the redistribution of land to tenants/cultivators and legislated ceilings on landholdings (10–20 acres/family and 6–7 acres/person).
most of low- and mid-land Kerala. The Government of Kerala indicates that within the district more than 50% of the population depend on agriculture for their livelihood, with agricultural labourers comprising 42% of the total labour class (Government of Kerala, 2004). The amount of cropped area to total geographical area in the district is 70.9% (2011–12) (Ecostat, 2013). Agriculture is highly diversified, but with one of the lowest rates of net area under irrigation in Kerala (5%) (Ecostat, 2010).

Livelihood portfolios

Cultivation in the Thiruvananthapuram panchayat is primarily organised into marginal holdings (< 2.5 acres) with low intensity, rainfed and on a small-scale. The majority of households surveyed own some land (97%), cultivating at least a small homestead garden, with a mean area of 21.2 cents (minimum 1.5 cents, maximum 2 acres) per household. The majority of plots by area were identified as homestead (71%), followed by agricultural lands (18%). Of the total area under crops, 4% are irrigated, 6% rainfed, and a minority rocky/fallow (1%). An assessment of cropping patterns reveals coconut as the most commonly grown crop and the primary agricultural source contributing to livelihoods. For those cropping patterns identified as the most important livelihood source, the following crops are most commonly cultivated: coconut, banana, jackfruit, mango and tapioca. The number of different crops cultivated is diverse with over thirty-two recorded and an average of 3.4 different crops per household.

Of the total households surveyed, the majority grow coconut (90%). The average area under coconut cultivation 17.5 cents and is cultivated on marginal landholdings (0.5 cents to 2 acres). The most common livelihood activities are salaried employment (20%), non-agricultural regular work (informal) (22%) and homestead gardening (15%). Although coconut production is a common activity throughout the panchayat, and does contribute to household welfare, it is not a primary livelihood source. Households primarily derive their livelihood from just a few sources. Those providing a primary contribution to the household include non-agricultural regular work (27%), migrant remittances (18%), salaried employment (11%) and non-agricultural regular work (10%)—a breakdown in line with the local description for the area as the ‘Mini Gulf’. Since the majority of households surveyed cultivate (at least some) coconut, while deriving their primary livelihood source outside agriculture, it is inadequate to refer to them as ‘farmers’. This designation effaces alternative livelihood strategies and thus raises questions on whether coconut producers in Thiruvananthapuram were significantly influenced by a ‘coconut crisis’.
Livelihood change, reorientations and outcomes

Coconut cultivation is primarily used as a subsistence crop (for raw nuts and oil). Households have generally moved away from coconut cultivation as a commercial crop and primary means of livelihood. The majority of households both use their own and purchased coconuts (58%), followed by only using their own (22%) or accessing them at no cost from family (2%). Most households surveyed in Thiruvananthapuram indicated they keep the majority of their coconuts for their household (86%), only selling them to the local copra yard (small-scale traders processing copra), neighbours or the market when they have a surplus. With limited production, the majority of households dry surplus raw coconuts. They store coconuts until they have enough to press at a local small-scale mill for household coconut oil. Many households only press coconut oil during festival season (particularly Onam, the harvest celebration in August/September). This outcome coincides with widespread closures of coconut mills that occurred in the 1980s.

In tandem with what can be termed a ‘re-localisation’ of coconut cultivation and processing, intensity of production is low. The majority of households indicated limited use and low levels of inputs, with few tilling and fertilising their crops (37%) and others conducting no maintenance at all (19%). Over-planting, inconsistently replanting, using inferior seedlings and practising minimal coconut palm maintenance (see also Narayana et al., 1991) was often discussed by coconut producers, processors and labourers. Furthermore, the majority of coconut palms in the area are ageing and no longer at their peak productivity. Coconut cultivation (as in most of Kerala) has experienced a decline in productivity. Households primarily connected this decline to widespread disease and secondly to environmental change, ageing coconut palms and cultivation techniques. In addition to these issues, the cost of labour and difficulties accessing and controlling labour, particularly pluckers were consistently attributed declining productivity of coconut (see Sportel, 2013). Particularly important households expressed a declining interest in agricultural cultivation and changing aspirations, particularly for younger generations. Many producers recounted the preference of their children to work outside of agriculture. This is particularly true of upper caste landowners from the Nair community (see Figure 4:3).
Figure 4.3: Case example of a ‘typical’ Nair household transitioning out of agriculture in Thiruvananthapuram panchayat, Kerala.

Seema (approximately 45 years old) is the de facto household head of a ‘typical’ Nair family in Thiruvananthapuram. She has a homestead garden in addition to 82 cents of irrigated agricultural land upon which the household cultivates 60 coconut palms. Previously they cultivated pepper as a commercial crop and others primarily for household use (banana, papaya, guava, gooseberry, sapodilla). Now they primarily cultivate coconut since her husband was transferred to Allepuzha, Kerala for work. In 2007 we stopped at her home after a plucker and woodcutter working in her homestead garden captured our attention. The labourers were in the process of cutting down a coconut palm. Seema was selling three disease-affected palms for timber because treatment of the palms was unsuccessful. While she sold the palms for Rs 900, the cost of labour to treat the disease-inflicted palms was Rs 600. She did not apply for compensation from the panchayat (although a scheme exists) nor has she accessed any fertiliser subsidies. In previous year these palms produced 20–25 coconuts each but production continued to decline.

In 2004 the coconut palms on their agricultural land, produced 1000–1500 coconuts/harvest. In 2007 these palms were only producing 300-400 coconuts/harvest. She indicated the the primary problem for declining productivity in the area is ageing coconut palms. Seema discussed the decreasing price of coconut and the difficulties accessing plucking labour. She sells her coconuts to a trader within the panchayat, who is also a relative, indicating that he no longer purchases many coconuts from other households because of the difficulty accessing labour for copra drying. She planned to replace the ‘ordinary’ palms with three hybrid seedlings, which would produce nuts in three years, yet have a shorter lifespan (10–15 years) than the traditional variety. Seema indicated that she has chosen this variety since her children have professional salaried employment in Bangalore, Karnataka, and have no intention to return home and maintain the family’s agricultural land.
4.8 Livelihood dynamics in Palakkad, the ‘Land of Palmyras and Paddy Fields’

Palakkad district is referred to in a variety of ways, including the ‘rice bowl of Kerala’, the ‘gateway to Kerala’ or the ‘land of palmyras & paddy fields’, while its etymology is traced to palanilam, or dry area. These are good descriptors of the landscape and climate of the region. Its economy is primarily agricultural, with agricultural labourers comprising over 65% of the total labour class, and 88.9% of the population rural (Government of Kerala, 2003b). In the Chittur block (where the Palakkad panchayat it located) the Government of Kerala indicates that approximately 75% of the population rely on agriculture for (a portion of) their livelihood (Government of Kerala, 2003b). The amount of cropped area to total geographical area in the district is 67.6% (2011–12) (Ecostat, 2013).

Large-scale coconut production is a relatively new phenomenon in Palakkad; coconut cultivation, processing and trade have expanded over the last thirty-five years in response to difficulties faced in paddy production, a trend observable all over Kerala (1975–1976 and 1995–1996) (see Government of India, 2008; Narayanan, 2003; Véron, 1999). Yet the district remains one of the main granaries in the state (Government of Kerala, 2003b). Palakkad is the largest producer of paddy in Kerala: 28% of the gross cropped area, comprising 40% of the total area within the state (Ecostat, 2013). Cultivation is more more intensive and extensive than Thiruvananthapuram. Palakkad district has the highest area net area under irrigation in Kerala, with approximately 50% of the area under coconut cultivation irrigated (Ecostat, 2010). Furthermore some landowners (present and absentee) in the Palakkad panchayat own large landholdings (e.g. 40–60 acres) despite state land reforms (1970). This has been possible by circumventing legislated ceilings (see Herring, 1983; Oommen, 1971; Varghese, 1970) through illegal property titles.

Livelihood portfolios

Cultivation in Palakkad panchayat is organised from marginal to large landholdings (< 2.5 to > 25 acres) with some landowners (present and absentee) maintaining large holdings of up to 60 acres, regardless of state land reforms. The majority of households surveyed own some land (95%), with a mean area of 65.7 cents (minimum 1.5 cents, maximum 15 acres) per household. However, the maximum area of land owned that was recorded in the survey does not reflect actual landholdings of large producers. Through follow-up discussions with community members it was confirmed that some landowners may have up to 60 acres. The majority of plots were identified as homestead lands (69%), followed by agricultural lands (13%), with 18% of the cropped area irrigated. An assessment of cropping patterns reveals coconut as the most commonly grown crop. For those cropping patterns identified as the
most important livelihood source for the household, the following crops are most commonly cultivated: coconut, banana, mango, neem and yam. The number of different crops grown is similarly diverse to Thiruvananthapuram with over 37 recorded and an average of 2.3 different crops per household. Of the total households surveyed, the majority grow coconut (74%). The average area under coconut cultivation is 71.2 cents and is cultivated on marginal landholdings as small as 0.5 cents, and medium landholdings of at most 12 acres.

The most common livelihood activities reported include casual agricultural labour (27%), homestead gardening (12%), cultivation (11%), salaried employment (11%) and other wage employment (10%). However, livelihood sources identified as providing a primary contribution to the household include non-agricultural casual labour (23%), other wage employment (14%) and attached agricultural labour (12%). The general importance of agriculture for the livelihoods of producers and labourers is telling of the rural landscape in the Palakkad panchayat – the ‘Land of Palmyras & Paddy Fields’.

Livelihood change, reorientations and outcomes

In Palakkad the majority of households purchase coconuts for household use (41%), followed by only their own coconuts (28%), a combination of their own and purchased (26%) and those obtained from family at no cost (0.3%). Most households surveyed in indicated they keep the majority of their coconuts for their household (80%), only selling them to local traders when they have a surplus. However, unlike Thiruvananthapuram, households in Palakkad are able to dry larger volumes of their own copra and press more for coconut oil, storing it for household use over a few months. The dry climate facilitates sun-dried copra during a larger portion of the year than Thiruvananthapuram. Some smaller-scale farmers also sell their raw coconuts to the large oil mill in the panchayat, receiving coconut oil in return. Furthermore, producers have also engaged in extensification of coconut production through contracting their trees for toddy tapping, engaging in trade and processing of raw coconuts.

While Thiruvananthapuram has experienced a ‘re-localisation’ of coconut cultivation, small to medium-scale producers have re-localised production of toddy (coconut palm wine) in Palakkad. Producers have rented out their coconut palms for toddy tapping since the early 2000s to local processors that produce the wine for local consumption. In contrast to Thiruvanantha-
puram, commercial cultivation and processing has expanded in Palakkad. The majority of households indicated limited use and low levels of inputs, with only a few tilling and fertilising their crops (38%) and others doing neither (51%). While this data may seem surprising, it is accounted for by the majority of marginal-producers practising less-intensive production. When asked about coconut productivity, households surveyed primarily connected declining production to environmental change, disease and cultivation techniques. A marginal number of households discussed toddy tapping and ageing coconut palms for any declining productivity experienced. Also telling, a number of households within the panchayat discussed reasons for increased productivity, while the number of responses in Thiruvananthapuram were negligible. Households primarily indicated that fertiliser application has improved their productivity, followed by maturing young coconut palms and sufficient rain or irrigation.

Although coconut cultivation is expanding in Palakkad, many producers (especially marginal and small-scale) expressed vulnerability in terms of access to credit through official channels. Coconut producers are commonly tied and indebted to traders and loans are recouped at the point of coconut sales. Many producers complained that this is one reason they receive a lower price for their coconuts. However, some medium-scale producers have been able to access state bank loans, the purpose of which was specifically to enhance paddy production (e.g. Rs 10,000–50,000 for 5 acres of paddy). They indicated that they were able to invest the paddy-specific loan into coconut cultivation without consequence from government officials. Presumably this practice may have helped expand the area under coconut at the expense of paddy.

However, many smaller coconut producers emphasised the difficulty in accessing loans through official channels. Farmers are commonly tied and in-debted to traders and loans are recouped at the point of coconut sales. Farmers complained that this is one reason they receive a lower price for their nuts: ‘we are being cheated by traders . . . small farmers take cash by advances from traders if they have any financial problem. When they purchase nuts from the farmer next time they pay less than the market price per nut and subtract the loan from the payment. If farmers do not have any financial problems they would get a good market price.’ In addition to in-debtedness farmers are unable to easily access harvesting labour (pluckers, dehuskers, loaders) or transportation. Although pluckers are able to work independently for producers their indebted relations with traders limit their availability. For example, one coconut producer indicated that ‘it is very difficult to get pluckers because the are tied to traders . . . over the past 10 years we have sold our coconuts to traders.’ Yet, producers primarily referred to coconut cultivation as profitable and a primary livelihood source.
Veerakumar’s family began cultivating coconuts in 1970. Their family previously focused agricultural production on groundnut and paddy. They began to switch to coconut because it became more difficult to access labour when required. When his father died in 1979 the family divided the land between himself and his brother. After taking over his own parcel he began to expand coconut production, and now owns at least 500 palms. Veerakumar maintains his palms by only applying organic fertiliser (goat manure) and tilling once a year. On average his palms produce 5000 coconuts every two months, but if it is a good season 7000 coconuts. Veerakumar indicated that although the price of coconuts has been decreasing, coconut cultivation remains profitable; ‘cultivation is always profitable, otherwise how can we live.’

Veerakumar sells his nuts to one of the largest Christian traders (also a coconut producer) in the area who processes copra and coconut oil. A few years ago Veerakumar dried and sold his own copra, however accessing labour became too difficult. At that time there was an accessible government run cooperative to which he was able to remit copra at the minimum support price. He has diversified within coconut production by contracting out a portion of his coconut palms for toddy tapping because ‘with toddy tapping you can double your profit’. Generally he contracts out 70 trees every three months, receiving advance payment of Rs 30,000. Veerakumar also discussed the availability of state bank crop loans. He recounted that loans intended for increasing paddy cultivation were and are often used to expand coconut production; the bank does not monitor their use.
4.9 Discussion: Diverging developments

The Governments of Kerala and India indicate that coconut remains an important crop for livelihood security (Government of Kerala, 2003a; Government of India, 2008) and is the ‘main stay’ of farmers in the state (KSPB, 2012). Indeed coconut is the most commonly grown and important crop for livelihoods in both Thiruvananthapuram and Palakkad. Yet its contribution as a livelihood source varies regionally and between community groups. Thus referring to the crop as the ‘main stay’ of ‘farmers’ does not adequately account for alternative livelihoods sources, which may contribute a larger share to household income. Coconut cultivators are not necessarily ‘farmers’ in the conventional meaning. This is particularly striking in Thiruvananthapuram where farming is no longer a primary livelihood activity for the majority of households. On the one hand, community groups of higher social status (e.g. Nairs) are generally moving out of agriculture, including coconut production, within Thiruvananthapuram. On the other hand, groups of similar status (e.g. Pillai, Chettiar) have transitioned out of paddy or ground nut cultivation and into coconut production. Furthermore, the majority of larger-scale producers in Palakkad are coconut traders and copra or oil processors, particularly from the Christian and Muslim communities.

Thus livelihood outcomes have only been indirectly influenced or determined by a coconut ‘crisis’. More influential are regional processes of agrarian change that articulate with macro-economic policies in varied ways. Livelihood change is arguably influenced by factors outside of agriculture, and particularly realised through diversification. Opportunities, changing aspirations and higher education-levels have had an important influence across Kerala. Yet, its affects are much more prominent in Thiruvananthapuram, while Palakkad still has a primarily rural and agriculturally-based economy. Through a historical approach it appears that coconut cultivation, processing and trade have continued to decline well before agricultural liberalisation and the ‘crisis’ in 2000. However coconut remains an important contribution, but not necessary the primary one, to livelihoods. Particularly illustrative, Thiruvananthapuram, a location typical of low- and mid-land Kerala is currently referred to as the ‘Mini Gulf’. Whereas in the early 20th century, coconut in Travancore was described as ‘the staple of Travancore, because the tree is all around us, shutting out the sky from our view … It is the plain truth that Travancore lives on this tree’ (G. T. Mackenzie, cited in Aiya, 1906, p. 191). Kerala has a long history of global trade and colonial influence, one in which coconut and its products played a primary role.

In contemporary times, apart from (or because of) an increased exposure to global and regional coconut markets, coconut producers have re-localised particular economic activities: the coconut growers in Thiruvananthapuram district have since the 1980s increasingly focused on copra production for home consumption; coconut producers in Palakkad have rented out their
palms for toddy tapping since the early 2000s to local processors that produce palm wine for local consumption. This happened at the expense of overall copra productivity and thus of the non-local commercial production of coconut oil. Furthermore the majority of (marginal) coconut producers have diversified livelihoods and not depended solely (nor even heavily) on the coconut economy. These findings reveal limitations of the government interpretations of liberalisation-induced change leaving farmers vulnerable within the coconut economy. These limitations result from macro-economic sectoral analyses, rather than local livelihoods (and diversified livelihoods). The traditional classification of someone with less than 2.5 acres as a ‘marginal farmer’ (rather than an agricultural labourer or salaried employee for example) seems to have led to a misplaced fixation on ‘farmer’ vulnerability.

4.10 Conclusion

The research demonstrates that the portrayal of (small) coconut farmers in Kerala as victims of liberalisation-induced change is misplaced. The narrative’s implied uniformity of a ‘crisis’ across Kerala effaces processes of uneven development. Kerala is formed by regions politically, economically, socially, and ecologically different, and thus it is important to consider whether livelihood change is uniform across the state. This has important implications for research and policy. Important is an understanding that there may not be such a direct relationship between macro-level economic policies (e.g. agricultural liberalisation) and livelihood change. These policies also articulate with wider processes of agrarian and market change regionally, as livelihood outcomes vary across space, and between social groups.

Small coconut producers with their diversified livelihoods did not recognise a ‘crisis’ as such. First, the majority of (small) coconut growers have diversified livelihoods and not depended solely (nor even heavily) on the coconut economy, nor even agriculture. Thus, ‘farmers’ have not really experienced a crisis when coconut prices collapsed in 2000–02 and stagnated later. Coconut cultivation has remained relatively attractive compared with the cultivation of other, more labour-intensive crops. Second, the narrative’s fixation on farmers masks the varying effects of the crisis on different households. Drawing from the extensive survey and interview data the research expands understanding of livelihood strategies, reorientations and outcomes within the coconut economy in Thiruvananthapuram and Palakkad.

Critical to the analysis is the recognition that political economy and history matter in particular places. Livelihood trajectories and social relations are shaped by historical and contemporary geographies (King, 2011; McCusker and Carr, 2006). ‘Livelihoods are inherently spatial’ (King, 2011, p. 297), and thus require explicitly spatial analysis. Harriss-White’s (2003) understanding of space as a social structure offers livelihoods studies a useful
way to avoid aspatial analyses. The framework herein addresses King’s (2011, p. 298) argument that ‘spatialising livelihoods is needed in order to examine how livelihood systems are embedded in socio-spatial articulations that are constructed and reconstructed over time.’

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Conclusions

5.1 In summation

The research started with the spectre of a liberalisation-induced coconut crisis affecting farmer livelihoods in Kerala (CACP, 2007; KSPB, 2004). Through a detailed ethnographic, comparative case study of two distinct regions (see Section 3.7), the research provides a nuanced view of change within the coconut economy. More generally, the research furthers understanding of uneven agricultural development and wider processes of agrarian change. The research explores issues at the macro, meso and micro scales. This allows for elucidation of key aspects of change beyond those derived from current neo-classical, macro-level economic studies (Lathika and Kumar, 2009; Narayana et al., 2006, 2001; Varma, 2004). Weaving the work together is recognition that social structures and the geography, history and political-economy of a region have important implications for the manifestations of globalisation on livelihoods in rural economies. The research, presented as three articles, makes important empirical and scholarly contributions through:

1. A comprehensive, nuanced and spatially disaggregated explanation of the changes in the coconut economy that goes beyond the common macro-level and sectoral analyses (Chapters 2 & 4).

2. Understanding the relationship between change within the coconut economy and the agricultural labour market through an analysis of structure and agency (Chapter 3).

3. Exploring regional variation of livelihood dynamics within the coconut economy (Chapter 4).

4. Contributing theoretically to the study of development narratives and labour geography (Chapters 2 & 3).
The remainder of the chapter presents these findings as a cohesive discussion organised in five parts: empirical contributions, scholarly contributions, considerations for policy, reflections on the research process, and recommendations for research.

5.2 Empirical contributions

Arguably the political discourse of a coconut crisis in Kerala is a persistent ‘narrative’ (see Roe, 1994). As most development narratives, it partly represents an oversimplification of a complex reality. The research herein moves beyond the narrative and develops a more comprehensive, nuanced and spatially disaggregated explanation of the changes in the coconut economy. It does so by first questioning the political explanation a crisis in which small farmers in Kerala were identified as victims from the liberalised importation of cheap palm oil. The study challenges the problem analysis of the ‘crisis’ juxtaposing it with information from ethnographic research. Diverse and complementary explanations, that are silenced by the official discourse, are revealed by local traders and farmers.

In addition to large-scale importation of cheap palm oil post-liberalisation of the oilseeds sector in the mid-1990s, other largely more important factors have to some extent adversely affected the relative attractiveness, profitability and productivity of coconut cultivation in Kerala. These include the general reorientation to non-agricultural livelihood activities, shortage of skilled plucking labour, increased market integration and competition with other coconut- and copra-producing south Indian states, oil adulteration practices and diffusion of coconut palm diseases. Further, the narrative overlooks key aspects of Kerala’s diminishing position within the coconut sector in India, such as the state’s agro-ecology (particularly the typical undulating midland hills) and fragmented landholding patterns that are ill-suited for commercial large-scale coconut production. It also does not account for regional differences within Kerala: Palakkad, for example, with its flatter landscape, dryer climate, larger landholdings and different social historical context than most other parts of the state has shown a distinct coconut development path. These shortcomings lead to inefficient policies. For example, in the eyes of local coconut producers, the ban on palm oil imports into the port of Kochi remained ineffective and the benefits of the cooperative procurement of copra at minimum support prices failed to reach the small cultivators in Kerala.

Particularly significant, the research shows that local labour shortages and increased regional competition, which varied from region to region, had a stronger impact on Kerala’s coconut development than liberalisation-induced change. Recently, reference to a labour shortage has garnered policy support as an important issue affecting the coconut industry (see, for example CACP, 2010; KSPB, 2012). However, this issue is commonly discussed in
simplistic neoclassical economic terms as an issue of inadequate labour supply to meet demand. This understanding is inadequate since labour markets in Kerala are socially structured and ‘locally constituted’. While there is a ‘labour shortage’ in Thiruvananthapuram and Palakkad, the local dynamics vary with place (Table 3.1). Clear regional differences exist in the ways coconut pluckers are organised and regulated through key social structures (space, caste, class, ethnicity). An analysis of the ways in which unorganised agricultural labour is socially regulated reveals changing aspirations of pluckers and difficulties controlling labour (Sportel, 2013).

The ability of Thandan pluckers to recalibrate power relations is an important aspect of the ‘labour shortage’ in Thiruvananthapuram. They are struggling to change their social position to address historical and geographical forms of caste- and class-based oppression. Thandan pluckers are actively reworking their terms of employment and caste-based identity by reaching into modern systems of class formation (e.g. education and shifting occupations). Furthermore they contribute to labour market regulation through coercive control of unskilled pluckers who are more socially excluded within the Scheduled Caste community. Thandan pluckers control access to work through their traditional occupational status, and their ability to leverage their social position within the wider Scheduled Caste community. This results in stronger labour market segmentation, while diminishing farmers’ ability to control labour. Although these strategies are effective, they are neither transformative or progressive (see also, Carswell and Neve, 2013). However, they do influence the local labour market (Sportel, 2013) in Thiruvananthapuram.

Not only does the political crisis narrative efface key processes of change within the agricultural labour market of Kerala, it inadequately addresses livelihood dynamics. Although the Governments of Kerala and India indicate that the coconut ‘crisis’ has implications for up to 3.5 million farmer families (CACP, 2007; KSPB, 2004), there have been no studies to this end. The narratives’ scientific foundation in macro-economic sectoral analyses, rather than in-depth micro-level studies seems to have facilitated the fixation on coconut production and farmers. The traditional classification of someone with less than 2.5 acres as a ‘marginal farmer’ (rather than an agricultural labourer or salaried employee for example) seems to have led to a misplaced fixation on ‘farmer’ vulnerability. Thus, the portrayal of (small) coconut farmers in Kerala as victims of liberalisation-induced change is misplaced.

Critical is the finding that small farmers with their diversified livelihoods did not recognize a ‘crisis’ as such. First, the majority of (small) coconut growers have diversified livelihoods and not depended solely (nor even heavily) on the coconut economy, nor even agriculture. Thus, ‘farmers’ have not really experienced a crisis when coconut prices collapsed in 2000–02 and stagnated later. Coconut cultivation has remained relatively attractive com-
pared with the cultivation of other, more labour-intensive crops. Second, the narrative’s fixation on farmers masks the varying effects of the crisis on different households, and across the state. Drawing from the extensive survey data the research expands understanding of livelihood strategies, reorientations and outcomes within the coconut economy of Thiruvananthapuram and Palakkad.

5.3 Scholarly contributions

The research contributes to three areas of scholarship. First, the research contributes to the study of narratives through combining Roe’s (1994) conceptualisation of development narratives with the ‘advocacy coalition framework’ (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993). Development narratives are either scenarios with a beginning, middle and end, or they are arguments with a premise and a conclusion that frame problems in particular ways, leading to particular solutions (Roe, 1991). Yet, development and crisis narratives do not exist in isolation. While they are relatively stable and persistent and while their origins and producers tend to be opaque, narratives need to be formed and reproduced by political actors in particular political contexts. Radaelli (1999) therefore suggested reinterpreting policy narratives in the ‘advocacy coalition framework’ (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993). The research extends this suggestion to include development narratives.

Second, the work contributes to labour geography conceptually and empirically. Conceptually, the work develops a framework that combines insights from Harriss-White’s (2003) version of the social structures of accumulation approach and a carefully delineated understanding of agency into resilience, reworking, and resistance (Katz, 2004). The framework allows for the recognition of individual and less obvious strategies of labour to improve understanding of the various forms of class struggle and resistance within a socially structured workforce. It thus attends to Coe and Jordhus-Lier’s (2011, p. 228) argument that ‘if labour geography is to offer researchers a better analytical framework – one which can explain why some workers’ actions seem to matter more than others – a more sophisticated understanding of the structural constraints and social relations that shape labour’s agency potential is required.’ The structure-agency approach offered here provides another way forward for labour geographers interested in the struggles and actions of ‘unorganised’ labour.

For example, the study of labour market change in the coconut economy of Kerala reveals that labour market organisation varies by place. Further, labour difficulties in Kerala (and possibly elsewhere in India) are more adequately explained through changing agrarian relations and the inability to sufficiently control labour. These findings result in three primary arguments of scholarly relevance: (1) labour markets are socially and spatially
structured and their regulation varies with geographical, historical and political-economic processes in particular places; (2) unorganised labour is able to regulate itself socially and informally, albeit in small ways; and (3) a structural approach is valuable to understand labour agency and the ways informal, unorganised labour is regulated.

Empirically the research contributes to labour geography through its focus on ‘unorganised’ agricultural labour in Kerala. The research moves outside of the common focus of collectively organised labour in manufacturing sectors in the West (see, for example James and Vira, 2012; Rigg et al., 2004; Rogaly, 2009). The analysis reveals the complexity of ‘locally constituted’ (Peck, 1996) labour dynamics. A simplistic explanation of a labour shortage (based on neoclassical economic models) overlooks the articulations between structure and agency. Functions of supply and demand do not account for regional differences rooted in historical, political-economic processes and geography. Nor can they explicitly identify issues around labour control and social regulation. Thus, it is inadequate to refer to ‘unorganised’ labour. This term masks the various ways labour is socially structured and regulates itself, albeit in small and possibly non-progressive ways.

Third, the work demonstrates that a focus on space is pivotal to livelihood studies. Critical is the recognition that political economy and history matter in particular places. (King, 2011, p. 297) argues that livelihoods are inherently spatial’, and thus require explicitly spatial analysis. Harriss-White’s (2003) understanding of space as a social structure offers livelihoods studies a useful way to avoid aspatial analyses. The framework addresses King’s (2011, p. 298) argument that ‘spatialising livelihoods is needed in order to examine how livelihood systems are embedded in socio-spatial articulations that are constructed and reconstructed over time.’ Applying a structural understanding of space through a historical analysis demonstrates the importance of moving beyond notions of ‘context’ to develop a more critical understanding.

5.4 Considerations for policy

While the research herein does not address current coconut-related policies and their varied impact in detail, some findings on their effectiveness are presented as important considerations.

Recent agricultural liberalisation has not simply and uniformly strengthened the state’s global orientation. Rather, reforms of the domestic market in India in the wake of international trade liberalisation (e.g. implementation and harmonisation of the value added tax, lifting of restrictions on movements of goods within India) have facilitated market integration at the regional scale, in the case of coconut between the south Indian states. Apart from (or because of) an increased exposure to global and regional
coconut markets, furthermore, coconut producers also re-localised particular economic activities: the coconut growers in Thiruvananthapuram district have since the 1980s increasingly focused on copra production for home consumption; coconut farmers in Palakkad have rented out their palms for toddy tapping since the early 2000s to local processors that produce palm wine for local consumption. This happened at the expense of overall copra productivity, and thus of the non-local commercial production of coconut oil. These changes are plausibly relevant for initiatives aimed at ameliorating the coconut ‘crisis’, such as expanding production of value added coconut products.

The dominant policy prescriptions inherent in the coconut crisis narrative (i.e. intervention in the coconut oil market in the short term and production-cost reduction in the long term) are in line with many pre-existing government policies and programs. To some extent, therefore, existing blueprint policies and programs have shaped the crisis narrative as much as the latter circumscribes the ‘space’ for alternative policies. The narrative may have been attractive to its main proponents because it relates to interventions they find doable. However, the alternative explanations (nonstories) of farmers and traders in Thiruvananthapuram and Palakkad point to weaknesses of the implemented policies. Particularly important are the protectionist policies aiming to bolster domestic coconut and copra prices and to bypass allegedly exploitative middlemen. These policies do not always directly benefit farmers, but instead the middlemen they purport to by-pass.

New interventions, such as the lift on the value added tax on copra or the creation of coconut clusters, fall into the category of relatively standard approaches of market regulation and production support. By contrast, the issue of labour shortages may not have been integrated in the coconut crisis narrative because of the lack of tested policy instruments to mitigate the problem. It is of little help to identify a problem without being able to propose a solution, a fix to it. It also seems neither feasible nor desirable to discourage members of the Thandan community, Kerala’s traditional coconut plucker caste, from looking for alternative, socially more respected, economic activities. Acknowledging a more nuanced understanding of labour market change and processes of labour control is important for forming effective policy. With this understanding it is questionable whether recent policy solutions, such as training programmes for pluckers (including women) and mechanical harvesters (see CACP, 2010; Ittyipe, 2011), will effectively address the ‘labour shortage’.

The ways in which the labour market is socially structured may prove challenging for newly trained pluckers; they may find it difficult to access regular employment. For example, although women may be trained to climb coconut palms with the aid of a climbing device, their family, community members and prospective employers may not support their attempt to ac-
cess regular plucking work. At the very least, women pluckers may be able to pluck their own trees, those belonging to family and households adjacent to their own. This would amount to a marginal number of trees per month. For new Scheduled Caste pluckers, the Thandan community may actively place barriers in their path to access regular employment throughout the panchayat. Furthermore, people in Thiruvananthapuram continue to see the Thandan community as the most skilled at their trade. Granted if the Thandan community successfully rework their social position in coming generations, other community groups (e.g. Kuruvan, other Scheduled Castes) may strengthen their hold over plucking.

5.5 Reflections on the research process

Travel is usually thought of as a displacement in space. This is an inadequate conception. A journey occurs simultaneously in space, in time and in the social hierarchy.

Lévi-Strauss (1989, p. 104)

Conducting research offers a personally and professionally rewarding and challenging experience. As a development geographer, issues of positionality, considerations of the ‘other’ and the uneven power relations between the East and West, are central to academic training. The researcher must work to be conscious of the ways in which they are situated, both socially and in a particular place (Elwood and Martin, 2000). This awareness is important for acknowledging how power relations may influence the research. As Chacko (2004, p. 51) argues, ‘the multiple subject positions and identities of both scholar and subjects as presented in the field vary with setting, and that these positionalities affect access to informants, the tenor and outcomes of encounters, and knowledge production.’ It is this very awareness, situated within a particular study location, that provides a richer experience.

Although privileged as a Caucasian Canadian, suffice it to say that as a woman from a working class background, privilege is relative. As the above quotation eludes, as one travels in space and time, one’s social position may also change. While conducting research in particular places in India, I was at times in a privilege position, while at others I fell in social rank. This oscillation of power is determined by a variety of factors. For example, interviewing a poor, scheduled caste coconut plucker results in a very different power relation than interviewing a high ranking, educated, wealthy government official. Other aspects such as the social position (gender, age, class, caste) of one’s research assistants, or the amount and type, or absence of tourism, in a particular location, can influence power relations, preconceived notions and research outcomes. I was reminded in various ways of where I stood in relation to various ‘others’.
Furthermore, not only are the interviews that did take place valuable, but the moments whereby a potential respondent refused to participate also provided important insight. For households who declined to participate in the survey, it was common for members to express concern over government tax collection, or for some poorer families to express inadequate returns for their time (financial compensation was not part of the research design). At times, it was difficult to obtain accurate data on landholdings or the returns on harvested coconuts. This was particularly true for households with medium and large holdings in Palakkad where some are beyond the legislated maximum. Within this ‘context’ longer-term ethnographic research was invaluable to gain a more comprehensive understanding.

5.6 Recommendations for future research

The dissertation leaves a wealth of data untouched, and stories silenced. The extensive survey data (\(n = 569\) households, \(n = 2,711\) individuals) and in-depth interview data (\(n = 140\)) provide further opportunity for publication. In the near future at least two peer-reviewed articles are planned, in addition to publishing the first (Chapter 2) and third manuscript (Chapter 4).

1. An analysis of the ways in which social structures (caste, class, ethnicity) mediate livelihood trajectories within Palakkad, Kerala. The paper will contribute to the livelihoods literature through its move away from ‘context’. It will provide a political approach through an explicit analysis across social groups.

2. A critical analysis of policies related to the coconut crisis narrative and their varied impact in Thiruvananthapuram and Palakkad, Kerala. The paper will complement the first manuscript (Chapter 2) by focusing on the weaknesses of the implemented policies. Particular attention will be paid to the protectionist policies aiming to bolster domestic prices and to bypass allegedly exploitative middlemen.
The research also leaves openings for further study. Four recommendations are provided with the hope to inspire new research endeavours. The suggestions presented are but a few of the ways in which the research may be expanded.

1. A more extensive policy analysis of the connections between liberalisation, agricultural development and government policies and programs, would contribute to a richer understanding of change within the coconut economy of Kerala. For example, study of government coconut development programs that are not oriented toward the small homestead producer in Palakkad may reveal interesting insight on expanding coconut cultivation. Such research could include an expanded analysis of government documentation coupled with in-depth field research with a policy and governance focus.

2. Further investigation of migrant experiences of the Thandan community, incorporating life histories and more interviews with family members, could lead to an interesting study on the communities’ ability to improve their social position. Extending this to a follow-up longitudinal study would add value to the current findings. Conducting comparative research on labour market regulation between Kerala and a location in the Persian Gulf would be an interesting contribution to this research, and migration studies in general. Further tying the research into a discussion on the ‘Kerala Model’ would contribute to discussions on the model’s social and economic sustainability.

3. An expanded, more detailed study on toddy tappers within Palakkad and elsewhere in Kerala would provide valuable insight on both unorganised and organised labour struggles. Situating this in terms of the Ezhava social movement should reveal interesting connections between social structures and labour market change.

4. Conducting a comparative study of equivalent research design on the coconut industry in Tamil Nadu would expand understanding the regional market change and variations is agrarian relations and labour market organisation.

5. Conducting a re-study of the Kerala coconut industry in ten years could provide further insight into processes of agrarian change. A study of comparative research design within the same study regions would provide valuable empirical and scholarly contributions, particularly to discussions of development and livelihood change.
Appendices
Semi-structured interview guide
Farmers

- Which community (caste) are you?
- What livelihood activities/sources does your family have?
  - Which activities/sources are the most/least important?
  - Has your family experienced any change to their livelihoods over the last 5/10 years?
  - How important is agriculture to your household?
  - Feel vulnerable?
- What crops do you cultivate?
- If grow multiple crops how have you decided to best divide land?
  - Intercropping? Why? Crop choice?
- How do you decide which crops to plant?
  - Do you feel that you have a choice (in the current market/social context)?
- Is farming better/worse now than 5/10 years ago?
- Do you have more/less land than 5/10 years ago? Have you lost or added any land?
- What (how much) landholdings do you have?
- Access/ability to change type of crops/intensity of crop?
- Do you cultivate coconut? How much land, and what type of holdings do you grow coconut on?
  - How many coconut palms do you have?
  - How do you maintain your coconut palms?
- How important is coconut for your family’s livelihood?
- How is coconut production/profitability?
- Has the importance of coconut (production/processing/household use) changed over the years (5/10 years)?
  - What are the reasons for these changes?
- Any challenges faced for coconut production/marketing/processing?
- Has coconut production/marketing/processing/household use changed over the last 5/10 years?
• Are you interested in changing the amount (decreasing/increasing) of coconut grown on your land?

• How is your coconut/copra/coconut oil marketed?
  – How/where do you sell your surplus?
  – Do you pre-sell crops?
  – Do you keep any stock?
  – Do you engage in contracts?
  – Do you have regular buyers?
  – How quickly are you paid?
  – Does the VAT (value added tax) influence your sales?
  – How has marketing changed over the last 5/10 years?

• How profitable is coconut/copra/coconut oil?
  – Has this changed over the last 5/10 years?

• Do you use your coconut/copra/coconut oil for the household?
  – If you process your own copra/coconut oil, how often and how?

• Alternative livelihood strategies?
  – Do they vary in the off season?

• What is your education level?
  – Your family’s education, and your children?
  – Will your children do this work?

• Have you had access to agricultural assistance (Coconut Development Board, Krishi Bhavan, government)?
  – If so, what kind of help?
  – Was it useful?

• Do you hire labour?
  – What types of labour do you hire (e.g. plucker, tilling/fertilising)?
  – How do you decide who to hire?
  – Who does the different tasks (labour division)?
  – Why? Some people better at some jobs?
  – Do you always hire the same labourers?
  – How often do you hire labour?
- How do you inform labourers of work?
- Where does your labour come from?
- Are they from a specific community?
- What is their payment (wage/coconuts/food/tea)
- How long do they work?
- How has labour changed over the last 5/10 years?
- Any challenges?

• Are there unions in this area?
  - Any changes over the last 5/10 years?

• Do you belong to a welfare association?

• What would you change to improve your situation?

• Has the government (state/national) provided assistance or incentives?
  - Is it sufficient?
  - Should they provide more assistance?
  - Can you tell me about coconut/copra procurement?
  - Is coconut/copra procurement it helpful?

• Does policy (government schemes/liberalization) influence coconut cultivation?

Labourers (pluckers/toddy tappers)

• Which community (caste) are you?

• What livelihood activities/sources does your family have?
  - Which activities/sources are the most/least important?
  - Has your family experienced any change to their livelihoods over the last 5/10 years?
  - How important is plucking/tapping?
  - Feel vulnerable?

• How long have you been a plucker/toddy tapper?
  - When and how did you start this work?
  - Did other family members (father/uncle/grandfather) do this work?
  - Will your children do this work?
• What is your education level?
  – Your family’s education, and your children?

• How is coconut production/profitability?
  – Has the importance of coconut production changed over the years (5/10 years)?
  – What are the reasons for these changes?

• Is plucking/tapping better/worse now than 5/10 years ago?

• Do you have more/less work than 5/10 years ago?

• Who do you work for?
  – What type of work do you do?
  – Do you always work for the same types of employers?
  – Are they from a specific community?
  – Is it permanent work?
  – What areas do you work in/outside the panchayat?
  – How is your work organised?
  – Do you work as a team/alone?
  – Who is on your team?
  – How long do you work?
  – Has there been any change to labour over the last 5/10 years?
  – What is your pay?
  – Do you receive an advance?
  – Do you receive other types of wages (e.g. food/emergency loans)?
  – If paid in coconuts what do you do with them?
  – Do you experience any difficulties with work (in general/employers)?

• Are there plucker/toddy tapper unions in this area? Others?
  – Any changes over the last 5/10 years?

• Alternative livelihood strategies?
  – What do you do in the rainy season?
  – Do you have any other coconut business (seedlings, trade)?

• Does your household use coconut/copra/coconut oil?
  – If you process your own copra/coconut oil, how often and how?
• What would you change to improve your situation?

• Has the government (state/national) provided assistance or incentives?
  – Is it sufficient?
  – Should they provide more assistance?

Trader/processor (coconut/copra/coconut oil)

• Which community (caste) are you?

• How long have you been a trader/processor?
  – What did you do previously?
  – Did anyone in your family do this business before you?

• How important is trading/processing for your family’s livelihood?
  – Feel vulnerable?

• Alternative livelihood strategies?
  – Do they vary in the off season?

• Has the importance of trade in coconut/copra/coconut oil changed over the 5/10 years?
  – What are the reasons for these changes?
  – Any challenges faced?

• Has coconut/copra/coconut oil trade changed over the 5/10 years?
  – Is trading better/worse now than 5/10 years ago?

• How is your coconut/copra/coconut oil trade organised?
  – How do you access coconuts/copra/coconut oil?
  – How do you maintain supply?
  – How does seasonality influence supply?
  – Consistent source of coconuts/copra/coconut oil?
  – Do you keep any stock?
  – Who do you buy from and in what areas?
  – Do you always purchase product from the same sellers/place?
  – How has this changed over the last 5/10 years
  – Do you pre-buy product?
  – How is your territory determined?
– How has your territory changed in last 5/10 years?
– Do you compete with other traders in your territory over the same products?
– Are you connected by family or caste to producers/other traders?

• How is marketing of your coconut/copra/coconut oil organised?
  – Where/how do you sell your product?
  – Do you always sell product to the same people/place?
  – How has this changed over the last 5/10 years?
  – Do you pre-sell product?
  – Where does the final product end up?
  – What is the product used for?
  – How is your product marketed?
  – How much volume do you purchase/sell/process per month?
  – Is storage an issue?
  – How quickly are you paid?
  – How has supply/demand changed over the last 5/10 years?

• How is the quality of the product determined?
  – Has the quality changed over the last 5/10 year?
  – Can you tell me about adulteration of coconut oil?

• How profitable is coconut/copra/coconut oil?
  – How are prices determined?
  – How has this changed over the last 5/10 years?
  – Any challenges faced?

• How does forward trading work?
  – How does forward trading influence the coconut/copra/coconut oil market?
  – Do you engage in this practice?
  – How has this changed over the last 5/10 years?

• How does futures trading work?
  – How does futures trading influence the coconut/copra/coconut oil market?
  – Do you engage in this practice?
- How has this changed over the last 5/10 years?

• What influence does the VAT (value added tax) have on your trade?
  - Has this changed over the last 5/10 years?

• Do you know what the prices are in other markets (Cochin/Kangeyam/TN/Alleppy)?
  - How do you find out?
  - Is this information easier/harder to obtain than 5/10 years ago?
  - Have the prices changed rapidly at any time?
  - Why do the prices changed?

• Do you use your coconut/copra/coconut oil for the household?
  - If you process your own copra/coconut oil, how often and how?

• Do you hire labour?
  - What types of labour do you hire?
  - How do you decide who to hire?
  - Do you always hire the same labourers?
  - Who does the different tasks (labour division)?
  - Why? Some people better at some jobs?
  - How often do you hire labour?
  - How do you inform labourers of work?
  - Where does your labour come from?
  - Are they from a specific community?
  - What is their payment (wage/product/food/tea)?
  - How long do they work?
  - How has labour changed over the last 5/10 years?
  - Any challenges?

• Are there unions in this area?
  - Any changes over the last 5/10 years?

• What is your education level?
  - Your family’s education, and your children?
  - Will your children do this work?

• Has the government (state/national) provided assistance or incentives?
– Is it sufficient?
– Should they provide more assistance?
– Can you tell me about coconut/copra procurement?
– Does coconut/copra procurement influence your trade?
– Is coconut/copra procurement helpful for farmers?

• What would you change to improve your situation?
• Do you belong to a welfare association?
• Feel vulnerable?
• Does policy (government schemes/liberalization) influence coconut trade/processing?

Government officials

• How long have you been working in this position?
  – What role do you play?
  – What is the mandate of your department?

• How important is coconut production and processing in Kerala?
  – How has this changed over the last 5/10 years?

• What are the important policies that influence the coconut economy?
  – What schemes are currently available?
  – Can you tell me about coconut/copra procurement?
  – How does the maximum support price work?
  – Can you tell me about the VAT (value added tax) on coconut/copra/coconut oil?
  – Can you tell me about adulteration of coconut oil?
  – What is done about adulteration practices?
  – When the ruling party within the government changes, do policies change?
  – Does this affect your coconut-related work?
Appendix B

Household survey schedule
1) Identification
Name of HH Head          Village          Religion
Name of Respondent       Ward           Caste
House Type               HH Number       Group

2) Household Characteristics
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>M/F</th>
<th>Relation to HH Head</th>
<th>*Education</th>
<th>*Medium</th>
<th>Livelihood Activity 1</th>
<th>Livelihood Activity 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>Head of Household</td>
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</table>

**Number of HH members**      **Number of Productive Members**      **Number of Dependents**

* for children still in school (Education); M for Malayalam medium, E for English medium
### 3) Source of Livelihood (in order of importance)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Owned</th>
<th>Leased In</th>
<th>Leased Out</th>
<th>Why? add * if doubts</th>
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</table>

Changes last 5-10 years?  | Y | N |
New Sources               |   |   |
Discontinued              |   |   |

Improvement?  | Y | N | Neither |

### 4) Land (cents/ acres)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Owned</th>
<th>Sharecropped In</th>
<th>Sharecropped Out</th>
<th>Leased In</th>
<th>Leased Out</th>
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</tbody>
</table>

Homestead Land
Agricultural Land
Irrigated
Rainfed
Unused

Why?

Changes last 5-10 years?  | Y | N |
New Sources               |   |   |
Discontinued              |   |   |

Improvement?  | Y | N | Neither |

### 5) Livestock (no.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cows</th>
<th>Buffaloes</th>
<th>Bullocks</th>
<th>Goats/Pigs</th>
<th>Poultry</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Changes last 5-10 years?  | Y | N |
New Sources               |   |   |
Discontinued              |   |   |

Improvement?  | Y | N | Neither |

### 6) Other Assets (no.)

|---------------------|--------|-----------------|-----------|--------------------|---------|-----------------------|-------|----|-------|-------------------|--------|-----------------|-----------|----------------|---------|-----------------------|-------|----|-------|

Changes last 5-10 years?  | Y | N |
New Sources               |   |   |
Discontinued              |   |   |

Improvement?  | Y | N | Neither |

### 7) Vulnerabilities (months, any hh mem)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unemployment (M)</th>
<th>Unemployment (F)</th>
<th>&lt; 2 meals (M)</th>
<th>&lt; 2 meals (F)</th>
<th>Distress Migration (M)</th>
<th>Distress Migration (F)</th>
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</table>

Changes last 5-10 years?  | Y |
New Sources               |   |
Discontinued              |   |

Improvement?  | Y | N | Neither | Y | N | Neither |

< 2 meals (M) | < 2 meals (F) | Distress Migration (M) | Distress Migration (F) |
8) Agricultural Livelihoods

**8 (a) Cultivation (in order of importance) + Acreage/Cents**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Crop System</th>
<th>Homest.</th>
<th>Own agr.</th>
<th>Tenancy</th>
<th>Rank</th>
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</table>

**8 (b) Household use of coconut & amount last season**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nuts</th>
<th>Copra</th>
<th>Oil</th>
<th>Tender Nuts</th>
<th>Other</th>
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</table>

**8 (c) How is coconut marketed?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Neighbours</th>
<th>Nuts-Yard</th>
<th>Copra-Yard</th>
<th>Copra-Mill</th>
<th>Tender Nuts</th>
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<th>Transport</th>
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<th>Other</th>
<th>(details)</th>
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**8 (d) Labour hired**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th># Labourers</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Wage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Plucking</td>
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<td>Tilling/Fertilising</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Details:*

```
* All changes since 1999-2000.
* All change over last 5-10 years.
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8) Agricultural Livelihoods

**8 (a) Cultivation (in order of importance) + Acreage/Cents**

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Tenancy</th>
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<th>Copra-Yard</th>
<th>Copra-Mill</th>
<th>Tender Nuts</th>
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**8 (d) Labour hired**

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<tr>
<th># Labourers</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Wage</th>
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<tr>
<td>Tilling/Fertilising</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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*Details:*

```
* All changes since 1999-2000.
* All change over last 5-10 years.
```
### 8b) Coconut: Labour, Processing & Trade (ranked in order of importance)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>HH mem #</th>
<th>M/F</th>
<th>Coconut-Copra-Oil Activity</th>
<th>Work days</th>
<th>Rank</th>
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Add * for subsistence (HH activity)

**Total (estimated) no. of coconut-related work days**

**Of which how many copra/oil related?**

Changes in work days?

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<th>No</th>
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If changes, which activity most increased?

If changes, which activity most decreased?

Changes in wage rate/profitability?

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If changes, which activity most increased?

If changes, which activity most decreased?

*All change over last 5-10 years.*
Authorship statement for Chapter 2
The manuscript *Coconut crisis in Kerala? Mainstream narrative & alternative perspectives* is co-authored by Terah Sportel and René Véron. Following the guidelines set forth by the Department of Geography, the work predominately comprises the intellectual contributions of the first author: conceptualisation (TS 75%, RV 25%); fieldwork (TS 100%); analysis (TS 100%); writing (TS 75%, RV 25%).

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<td>René Véron</td>
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APPENDIX E

Pictorial foray into the field
Figure E.1: Typical landscape of rural Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala. A canopy of coconut palms, undulating topography, lowlands and backwaters are characteristic of this low- and mid-land area.
Figure E.2: Typical landscape of rural Palakkad, Kerala nestled in a mountain pass. Paddy fields, palmyras (toddy palms) and coconut palms are cultivated on flat topography. The Western Ghats and Tamil Nadu border are in the distance.
Figure E.3: Research assistants discuss strategy while conducting the household survey in Thiruvananthapuram panchayat.
Figure E.4: Jithin Raj interviewing the father and son of a Muslim family with a copra trading business. The family business has been operating in rural Kollam District, Kerala for over 50 years. The copra yard is located in the courtyard of the family home. In the photo they are discussing copra quality.
Figure E.5: A (skilled) plucker poses while climbing a coconut palm. He is from the Vedan community, living in a Scheduled Caste colony in Thiruvananthapuram panchayat, Kerala. A veatte kathi (plucking knife) is hanging from his waist. We interviewed him on two separate occasions; he provided in-depth discussion and 3.5 hours of his time. He has his grade two education and learned plucking at a young age. He was able to access regular work with the largest family run copra yard in the panchayat. He trained under Thandan pluckers and now works independently as a plucker and woodcutter.
Figure E.6: A skilled plucker from the Thandan community, Thiruvananthapuram panchayat who started plucking at the age of 20 (a bit later than most). Previously working as a woodcutter with his father; he changed occupations when his father died. When we interviewed him he had 13 permanent houses for plucking, some with 5 palms and others with 50 or more. His family is primarily reliant on this income for their livelihoods. He discussed plucking as difficult and risky, particularly the health affects of applying some pesticides and the dangers of climbing. He recounted when he was electrocuted by an 11 kV line. The landowner did not bring him to the hospital or provide financial support for medical expenses. He would prefer his children pursue alternative work stating ‘cleaning plates at a hotel is better than plucking’.
Figure E.7: An unskilled Scheduled Caste plucker and his wife standing in front of their home in a Scheduled Caste colony in Thiruvananthapuram panchayat, Kerala.
Figure E.8: The home of a Thandan plucker currently under construction in Thiruvananthapuram panchayat, Kerala. The home is situated within the main panchayat and not in a Scheduled Caste colony.
Figure E.9: Interviewing a tenant coconut producer in Palakkad panchayat, Kerala. He lives and labours on the land with his family for an absentee landowner living in Ernakulam. This is an arrangement with tethers to past land-labour relations prior to land reforms in Kerala. Such an arrangement is characteristic of the semi-feudal agrarian relations in the region.
**Figure E.10:** The homes of attached agricultural labourers who live and labour on the land for a large landowner in Palakkad panchayat, Kerala. This is an arrangement with tethers to past land-labour relations prior to land reforms in Kerala. Such an arrangement is characteristic of the semi-feudal agrarian relations in the region. This area in the panchayat is referred to as the ‘forest area’. A toddy contractor has leased coconut palms on the same land. The toddy tappers working for the contractor reside in small quarters nearby.
Figure E.11: A typical copra yard in Thiruvananthapuram District, Kerala. Dehusked and split coconut are drying in the sun to form copra. Piles of coconut husks are visible on the left side of the picture. Labourers are unloading coconuts from a small lorry in the distance.
Figure E.12: A medium-scale copra yard and coconut oil mill in Palakkad panchayat, Kerala. This is the largest operation in the area. Women labourers from the nearby Scheduled Caste colony are deshelling copra under an awning to protect them from the sun and rain. In the distance a large pile of copra is covered by a blue tarp to protect it from the monsoon rain.
Figure E.13: Large-scale copra yard and oil mill in rural Kangeyam, Tamil Nadu. Traders have a stronger control over labour and use of migrant labour is more common than in Kerala. Housing quarters for attached labourers are visible in the distance. The climate in Kangeyam is dryer than Kerala and larger landholdings facilitate space to sun dry coconut.
Figure E.14: Labourers at a large-scale copra yard and oil mill in rural Kangeyam, Tamil Nadu. The men and women are deshelling copra while sitting in the hot sun.
Figure E.15: A women deshells copra at a small copra yard in Thiruvananthapuram District, Kerala. She is sitting under an awning on the porch of her employer’s office.
Figure E.16: A young man dehusking coconuts at a small copra yard in Thiruvananthapuram District, Kerala. He works under the shade of a coconut palm. In the distance two male labourers are sorting copra for drying.
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