Understanding Labour: A Study of Tea Plantations in Wayanad, Kerala.

This paper aims to understand working class formation among the Mappila Muslims who are working in the tea plantations in Wayanad, Kerala. Wayanad, a region which was part of the Malabar district of Madras Presidency in British India, witnessed the formation of a large number of plantations in the first half of the nineteenth century. Previous studies about tea plantations in Wayanad mention the migration of various communities as workers to this region. Mappila Muslims, mainly from South Malabar, was one of the major communities who migrated to these plantations.

The working class formation is more complex in the context of tea plantations of Wayanad. Since Mappila Muslims constitute the largest working class category this paper will argue that class formation among Mappila Muslim tea plantation workers as influenced both by their material conditions as well as the socio-cultural practices of the community. The different academic perspectives on class is expected to help to make sense of the process of class formation in its complexity.

By using the ideas of Karl Marx, E. P Thompson and Eric Olin Wright this paper will elaborate the complexity of class formation in the tea plantations of Wayanad. According to Karl Marx, the class is primarily identified with its relations with means of production or the production and reproduction of the material world and its subsequent social formation. Marx’s own approach, even when giving primacy to the economic factors, conceded the importance of political, social & cultural factors; but there were generations of writings on the working class formation which reduced the entire formulation to a rigid base-superstructure model, wherein the forces of production in the base are the deciding factors in any unfolding social phenomena. Thompson has suggested that class is not a structural fact, rather it is a historical process and the outcome of struggle, experience and consciousness. At the same time, he insisted upon the importance of understanding class or class consciousness was largely determined by the production process.

In the same way, Eric Olin Wright also has given a broader explanation of class formation, which will be applicable in the context of Wayanad tea plantations. Wright (1997) argues that class formation shouldn’t be thought of simply in terms of formation of social relations among people
within a homogenous class location in a class structure. In the context of Wayanad tea plantation, the paper argues that the religious customary practices of the Mappila Muslim played a significant role in the working class formation.

This paper will attempt to trace how class negotiates with religion, and how these negotiations influence working class formation among Mappila Muslims which in turn alters their religious values and customs in the context of tea plantations in Wayanad.

**Key Words:** Tea Plantation, Working class formation, Mappila Muslims, Wayanad

**References**


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