Alternative Agricultures in South India: Farming Experiments between High-Tech and Heritage

This paper discusses a variety of experiments and projects in response to an ecological and social crisis of agriculture in South India. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in Wayanad (Kerala) the paper argues that in the wake of crisis many small-holders seek alternative ways of cultivation that are both more viable and more sustainable. By referring to the agro-environmental history of Wayanad I show that agrarian alternatives emerge as responses to situated experiences of health problems, ruin, degradation and despair. I thus argue that innovative engagements with land, soil and markets are best studied in conjunction with regional ethnographies of agro-ecological crises in the context of contemporary capitalism. In the district under study, at a moment of uncertainty for small-holders, a range of alternative agrarian possibilities emerge that range from farmers embracing neoliberal capitalism and its promise of high-tech fixes (new cash crops, precision farming, poly house farming) and to rejecting it in farming models that point towards a revival of India's agronomical heritage and alternative economies (natural farming, revival of seed heritage, organic farming). Taken together these agrarian possibilities constitute a situation of agronomical pluralism (in analogy to the medial pluralism) with complex entanglements of situated knowledges, science and alternative science.