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Untangling Agricultural Ethics: Women's Collective Agriculture in India as Alterbiopolitics

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Summary

Alternative food narratives imply an ethical relationship to food production and consumption practices. Organic food and agriculture are known as ethical alternatives since they use methods which counter dominant food systems and markets dependent on industrial agriculture and chemical inputs. The organic movement itself, although global, is locally articulated and relationally situated in ecologies, cultures and politics. However, 'Organic' is also a global brand, with global ambitions. This paper aims to tease out the discrepancies between global ethical discourse and situated ethical practice by bringing together existing ethnographic insights from women's organic agricultural collectives in South India with a discourse analysis of the joint annual reports by FiBL (Research Institute of Organic Agriculture, Switzerland) and The International Federation of Organic Agricultural Movements (IFOAM - Organics International). In problematising the inner workings of the narratives found in these reports, the paper unpacks their colonial continuities, demonstrating the biopolitical regimes of representation they help reproduce. The practice of organic collective agriculture in South India, I argue, represents an 'alterbiopolitics' which questions the universalist assumptions of IFOAM - Organics International's 'growing organic world'.

Keywords: collective farming, organic, India, colonialism, ethics, alterbiopolitics

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Introduction

Alternative food and farming movements in South India demonstrate some of the different negotiations happening in response to dominant chemical-orientated farming practices in the country at large (Mansata 2010; Galvin 2014; Münster 2018; Singh, Kulkarni and Broome 2018). Often rooted in Green Revolution farming practices and technologies, chemical farming has contributed to the economic and social marginalisation of agricultural communities in India (Reddy and Mishra 2010; Shiva 2016). Combined with the long-term ecological effects of the Green Revolution, such as the scarcity of water and the degradation of land due to agrochemical use (Patel 2013; Shiva 2016), these entangled social, economic and ecological conditions have contributed to agricultural distress, including farmer suicides across the country (Padhi 2012; Neelima 2018).

One of the many alternatives practised in India is organic farming, which has emerged as a global movement to counter conventional, chemical-dependent agriculture. Organic food and agriculture have become known as ethical alternatives to dominant food systems and markets dependent on industrial agriculture and chemical inputs (Guthman 2003). The practice of organic or non-chemical agriculture relies on situated knowledges of local ecologies and landscapes, and involves multiple and diverse farming methods interwoven with local cultures and politics, making the political and ethical practices which inform them diverse and heterogeneous (Pande and Jha 2016; Schreer and Padmanabhan 2019).

However, 'Organic' is also a global brand, with global ambitions. The International Federation of Organic Agricultural Movements (IFOAM - Organics International) portrays a 'growing organic world' in their numerous annual reports. Yet within such universalist visions, organic farmers are condensed into narrow categories, flattening their everyday realities, rendering invisible the heterogeneity of organic agriculture and concealing the diversity of agricultural communities. In India, where agricultural communities face systemic injustices and the dominant sociolegal category of 'farmer' exclude those who fall outside of the male, landowner norm, the consequence of such narratives is to silence and reproduce these dynamics.

To address this silencing, I draw on academic literature and ethnographic insights from women's organic farming collectives in South India, which explores the ethico-political practices of more-than-human care emerging from the struggles of women farmers to be recognised, and for their agricultural practices to matter. By bringing these insights together with a discourse analysis of the joint annual reports by FiBL (Research Institute of Organic Agriculture, Switzerland) and IFOAM - Organics International, the paper aims to tease out the discrepancies between ethical discourse and ethical practice, therewith questioning the premise of global organic narratives and markets (Johnston, Biro and MacKendrick 2009).

Furthermore, in problematising the inner workings of the narratives found in these reports, the paper unpacks their colonial continuities, demonstrating the biopolitical regimes of representation they help reproduce. The practice of organic collective agriculture in South India, I argue, represents what Puig de la Bellacassa (2017) terms 'alterbiopolitics' – through which, the universalist assumptions of IFOAM - Organics International's 'growing organic world' are questioned.

Situating agricultural collectivity in South India

As an alternative form of agriculture, women farmers working collectively on the land have received particular attention in the media and in scholarship over recent years (see Agarwal 2018; Chandran 2018; Rathod 2018; Leder et al. 2019). Kudumbashree initiatives in Kerala and farming collectives supported by the Deccan Development Society in Telangana have become well-known examples of alternatives to the dominant agricultural and development practices and discourses mentioned above (Agarwal 1992, 2003, 2018; Kulkarni 2018). Collectivity in farming takes a multitude of forms such as cooperatives, community-supported agriculture, self-organised collectives and Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs). This heterogeneity is made visible in the variety of different forms, structures, principles and meanings in operation among farming collectives. As scholars in Feminist Political Ecology and Critical Agrarian Studies have shown, collectives are shaped by intersecting and historic power dynamics and situated politics, contributing to a messy and ambiguous process of unfolding agricultural relations (Padmanabhan 2008; Kunze 2017; Leder et al. 2019; Agarwal 2020; Kozhisseri and Rajan 2020). As an alternative agricultural practice, Agarwal (2003) argues, collective agriculture challenges the intersecting injustices of unsustainable farming practices and issues of gendered land entitlement and access.

As these studies show, agricultural collectivities are relationally constituted and situated in particular ecologies and cultures, yet often actively shape different social and political scales – household, state and market (Agarwal 2003). As an agricultural practice, they also exist within narratives and representations of knowledge and food, being embedded in particular histories. As Laksmana demonstrates, the embodied knowledge of farmers – although silenced by hierarchical norms in scientific-knowledge production – informs agriculture as a technoscience, where 'agricultural practice is the confluence of knowledge, both local and scientific, with material production' (Laksmana n.d., 2). Within this confluence, global food-trade regimes and agricultural markets also arguably shape processes of agricultural material production (Poerting, 2015; Patnaik and Patnaik 2017). As Freidberg (2010a) argues, these processes continue to be regulated by colonial knowledge hierarchies between imperial nations and postcolonial countries, maintaining inequities between producers and consumers – therewith often shaping the bodies and labour of food producers in subtle ways. In countries where agricultural markets have been more internally regulated, such as India, Patnaik and Patnaik (2017) argue that inequalities between temperate and tropical

or subtropical regions which map onto the colonial ordering of the metropole and the periphery still impact these internal dynamics. These ‘colonial continuities’ are therefore expressed through inequalities in market realities, and discourses about knowledge and food production which perpetuate hierarchies and dichotomies between producers and consumers, ‘developed’ and ‘developing’, north and south.

The term colonial continuities has, in relation to development and agriculture, been employed to point to imperial logics of governance, development ideals and projects, or economic policy (Nally 2010; Patnaik and Patnaik 2017; Dengler and Seebacher 2019). The ‘continuity’ part suggests linkages can be traced between contemporary places and people and colonial histories and practices. Although these linkages are never straightforward forms of control and ‘power over’ (Rao 2007), these continuities have lived consequences in the present. Understanding the inequalities of agricultural markets and the forms of knowledge and power which underpin them, Patnaik and Patnaik (2017) argue, must involve historicising the imperial logics at their root, which sustain inequities between ‘the metropole and the peripheries’ – or the so-called ‘developed’ and the ‘developing’. This exploration, I contend, is also relevant in understanding global discourses of ethical food consumption and production, which on one hand attempt to create alternative standards informed by ethical practices such as organic agriculture and moral principles such as ‘fairness’. On the other hand, the same discourse operates within global food-trade regimes and thus within the colonial continuities of agricultural markets. Such arrangements are, therefore, historically embedded in a violent ethics of colonialism, which sought the moral and material ‘improvement’ of people and landscape (Pandian 2009) and their categorisation for the purposes of administration and taxation (Appadurai 1996). This paper attempts to look at the disconnect which occurs, and the mismatch between, ethical discourse and ethical practice when they find themselves entangled in colonial continuities.

As an entry point into these entanglements, the implications of discursive and scientific representations of a ‘growing organic world’, and organic agriculture in India specifically are explored, via joint annual reports produced by FiBL and IFOAM - Organics International. These are examined in relation with the struggles of agrarian communities as well as the agricultural alternatives practiced by women’s organic farming collectives in South India. It is beyond the scope of this paper to investigate the statistical claims of the reports, nor is it the subject of my inquiry. Rather, of concern here is unravelling the ways in which sociolegal categories of ‘farmer’ intersect with the representations in such reports to further obscure the realities of agricultural communities in India. It is important to note that although the subject of critique is the narratives of global organic-food production, their ethical premise as well as the colonial continuities embedded in such discourse, I do not assume that agricultural collectives and women farmers

are producing food for global organic-food chains.[1] Rather, I want to argue that the inner workings of the 'growing organic world' discourse silences the heterogeneity of agricultural practices in India and other countries, obscuring complex realities – done for the purpose of generating numbers about organic produce which fulfil an ethical-consumption premise (as located in the imagination of organic consumers). The nuances of this heterogeneity and the complexity of political struggles in agricultural communities in India are exemplified by women's organic agricultural collectives and their practices.

To unpack these representations, I work with postcolonial and decolonial critiques of discursive and scientific representations that make claims about progress without historicisation of the colonial processes within which they work (Spivak 1990; Escobar 1994; De Sousa Santos 2018). I bring this analysis together with scholarship in feminist Science and Technology Studies which dissects the basis of authority behind scientific claims to truth and the representation of social and cultural worlds (Haraway 1988; Asdal, Brenna and Moser 2007). First, by contextualising the narratives of struggle and alternatives coming from agricultural communities in South India, particularly women's organic farming collectives, the paper attempts to turn 'absent subjects into present subjects as the foremost condition for identifying and validating knowledges' (De Sousa Santos 2018, 2). And, second, bringing these struggles into critical relationship with the reports, it aims to question the discursive effects of the ethical and scientific representations of a 'growing organic world'. In doing so, I do not make claims to represent or speak on behalf of agricultural communities in India; rather, I wish to explore how an intervention into knowledge claims, from the experiences of agricultural communities, can make visible and draw attention to alternatives which challenge normativities (Foucault 1980; Singleton 2007), as well as question the basis upon which ethical discourses around food and agriculture operate.

The dislocated discursive production of ethical-food discourses and the silences and inequalities they reproduce are thus the theoretical focus here. In particular, the paper looks at the way in which ethical discourses about food and agriculture have emerged in a specific setting through universalised categories which reproduce specific regimes of truth and power about agricultural practices, landscapes and communities (Foucault 1980, 86). To examine this, I will attempt to explore in what ways such discourses produce silences around the alternative agricultural practices described above, and by doing so obscure the uneven relations such discursive and market inequalities can create. This approach follows what Foucault described as an 'archaeology of knowledge' (1980, 66), whereby different systems of knowledge which produce regimes of truth are examined along three lines of questioning: What is the history of this 'will to truth'? What are its effects? How are these interwoven with relations of power?

1 Even larger organisations such as Timbaktu Organic, who are comprised of ten collectives and over 125,000 farmers, only sell to the Indian market (The Timbaktu Collective 2021).

However, as a scholar engaging in discursive interventions and therefore part of the same process of interpretation and shaping (Haraway 1988; Nightingal 2003; Law 2004), my positionality and the colonial continuities of my own intellectual endeavours are important to note. As a PhD scholar from the United Kingdom studying in Germany and researching in India, the privileges of my social position, mobility and knowledge production as well as the histories which condition these privileges are problematic and uncomfortable to sit with. The epistemic inequalities reproduced by this arrangement cannot be solved through reflexivity and awareness alone, but they can be questioned and critically reflected upon as part of a wider collaborative process of undoing hierarchies of knowledge production (Idahosa and Bradbury 2020; Millora, Maimunah and Still 2020). As this is a conceptual paper, I cannot claim to speak to the experiences of farmers directly. Rather, what follows thinks with the situated politics and practices of organic collective farming in India, therewith exploring how colonial continuities play out through discourses and representations of organic agriculture in reports by IFOAM - Organics International. I seek to investigate to what extent such agricultural alternatives demonstrate alterbiopolitics at play. The claims in these reports about organic agriculture of global proportions, which rests upon the ethical premise of the organic movement, raises the question 'ethical for whom?'

To begin, I discuss how the recent history of the Green Revolution in India is interrelated with the lives of widows from farmer suicides and the responses from agricultural communities, particularly the collective organic agriculture of women farmers in South India. I will then bring these histories and experiences together with the discourses and claims of recent annual reports published by FiBL and IFOAM - Organics International to think through the representations they produce and their discursive effects. Finally, I will address to what extent these reports feed into colonial continuities of biopolitical 'regimes of representation' of agriculture and how the situated politics of collective organic agriculture mobilise alterbiopolitics in offering 'an alternative path in the politics of living with care in more-than-human worlds' (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, 130). I strive to sketch out the entangled biopolitical processes of categorisation, counting and discursive representation regarding agricultural relations, whilst thinking about how the alterbiopolitical arrangements of organic collective farming can challenge these processes. This, I suggest, is achieved through their contribution to the political and ethical recognition of, or the 're-mattering' of, agriculture and agricultural communities (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017).

Connecting chemicals, suicides and collectivity in agriculture

The reliance on agricultural chemicals arguably began with the Green Revolution, when a combination of post-Second World War ideologies of progress and development, scientific innovations regarding the use of chemicals against insects and fungi, and the development of agricultural technologies sought to improve crop

yield, production capacities and efficiency (Carson 1962; Shiva 2016). The use of agrochemicals has been widely adopted, but the effects have been particular – leading to various ongoing socioecological and economic effects (Patel 2013; Shepherd 2019). In her critique of the green revolution, Shiva (2016) argues, political and market forces in Europe promoted and normalised chemical use in farming as the solution to famine and food scarcity in India. This, as Mehta, Huff and Allouche posit, can be traced further through a complex politics of scarcity which 'as a relation, is simultaneously constructed and "real"' (2019, 2) – demonstrating how particular articulations of food scarcity have come to dominate and shape academic narratives and policies, as well as lives and livelihoods. These histories, I argue, are intimately tied to contemporary narratives and imaginations of who constitutes a farmer socially, legally and politically, and are therefore, as I will show in the next section, entangled in dislocated discourses about the expansion of organic agriculture in India.

Within 20 years after the introduction of Green Revolution technologies in Punjab in the 1970s, farmer suicides were on the rise across India (MAKAAM 2020). In her analysis of the experiences of widows in Punjab during the first decade of the 21st century, Padhi (2012) notes that the suicides are a manifestation of collapsing agricultural communities – revealing the fraught interdependencies between agriculture, caste, gender, economics and ecologies. She showed how the Green Revolution, as both an ideology and collection of practices, undermined these complex relations. Furthermore, Padhi highlights that the narrative surrounding the unfolding agrarian crisis was also shaped through the same logics of gender, caste and class hierarchies, which serve to marginalise women farmers – particularly widows. Statistical representations of suicides in narratives of the agrarian crisis do not address the incompleteness of the category of 'farmer' (MAKAAM 2020). The exclusion of women, landless and 'ineligible' suicides not only pushes the experiences and hardships faced by families further into the margins but also obscures the actual number of suicides occurring (Sainath 2010; MAKAAM 2020). As Padhi (2012) and Sainath (2015) both illustrate, the effects of the agrarian crisis do not end with the death of a loved one for 'suicide-affected households',[2] and yet the experiences of 'those who did not die' are characterised by their near silencing in the narratives of farmer suicides in India.

These silences are tangled up with the sociolegal category and cultural imagination of the 'farmer'. In the Indian Census, for example, agricultural workers are counted and measured through land size and ownership – or 'operational holdings'. Since land rights and access in India are mediated through religion-centric inheritance laws, customary practices (Wahi 2013) and patriarchal norms which influence negotiations over property ownership (Kulkarni and Bhat 2010), who gets counted

2 This term is used by civil society organisations in India to bring recognition to the layered, multiple and ongoing social and economic effects of suicide (MAKAAM and MSCW 2016; Bais et al. 2019).

as a farmer is a socially mediated process. This contributes to a reproduction of the imagination of a 'farmer' or 'food producer' as a male land-owner, thus obscuring the different actors in agricultural communities – including women farmers, farm labourers, landless and daily-wage workers. The interweaving of these political and legal categories with 'Brahmanical patriarchies' (Chakravarti 1993; Rege 2013) renders invisible both women and marginalised castes, further restricting their access to land and their rights as citizens – including the rights over their own bodies and labour (Ambedkar 2014b, 23, 2014a, 107).

Women are therefore made imperceptible as farmers because their gender is not recognised as fitting the social imaginary. This is underpinned by their lack of social and legal access to land – despite related legislation suggesting inheritance is egalitarian (Ribot and Peluso 2003; Rao 2007).[3] This 'frame of recognition', drawing on Butler's (2016) concept, is maintained by multiple intersecting powers including the state, local customs as well as caste and patriarchal norms, which mediate land rights and succession (Rao 2007; Wahi 2013). Farm widows, who either already *are* farmers or become so after their husbands' deaths, face multiple forms of stigmatisation, through which complex and context-specific patriarchal and caste norms intersect to produce particular experiences of widowhood. As Mohindra, Haddad and Narayana (2012) demonstrate, akin to the idea of a 'social death', becoming a widow entails encountering multiple layers of stigma which can compound existing forms of gender and caste oppression. Furthermore, being of a higher social class or economic status as a widow does not necessarily equate to increased power or mobility. Rather, as Kulkarni and Bhat describe, patriarchies can be 'accommodative' (2010, 62) and multiple, often determining a widow's status in the household, which is shaped according to the needs of the latter and to maintain the patriarchal order. For a farm widow, this layered stigmatisation directly affects her ability to cope in the aftermath of suicide and to access the schemes and welfare which could support her (Mohindra, Haddad and Narayana 2012). Moreover, these dynamic processes further make invisible her experiences, needs and voice as a farmer, with material effects on her livelihood and ability to care for herself and other family members (Ghunnar and Hakhu 2018).

In response to the agrarian crisis and the uneven experiences of 'being a farmer' discussed above, women's organic farming collectives have formed as an alternative agricultural practice which challenges the intersecting issues of gendered land entitlement and access, food security and safety (Agarwal 2016; Pande and Jha 2016; Leder et al. 2019). There are various institutional arrangements through which agricultural collectivity or 'group farming' is negotiated and renegotiated in India: Joint Liability Groups (JLGs), Self Help Groups, FPOs as well as self-determined, self-organised collectives. Furthermore, many groups include both men and women, such as those supported by the MS

3 This phenomenon is addressed in the European context by Prügl (2011), who unpacks the role of patriarchy and gender dynamics in European agricultural policy.

Swaminathan Research Foundation in Tamil Nadu (see Rengalakshmi and Rao 2020). The type of agriculture engaged in is also diverse: some farm organically, others use pesticides and some grow food forests and engage in agroforestry methods. However, the examples drawn upon for this paper do adopt organic farming – which, as I will discuss in the last section, is an important factor in alterbiopolitical arrangements.

In Kerala, South India, women's farming collectives have become widespread, especially since the State Poverty Eradication Mission of the Government of Kerala started to experiment with collective-farming models in 2004 under the Kudumbashree network – itself first established in 1998 (Abraham 2019). This government-led programme encouraged women farmers to form JLGs to increase 'the scope of income earning activities of rural women' (Abraham 2019, 19), to address the related issues of increasing fallow land (often being bought up as real estate) and to oversee the feminisation of a shrinking agricultural sector (Agarwal 2018; Pattnaik et al. 2018). These small farming groups of four to ten women are supported through government-subsidised loans, skills development and marketing linkages to Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGSs),[4] as well as local farmers markets and Kudumbashree shops which prevent exploitative practices by intermediaries (Kulkarni 2018; Government of Kerala 2021). As Kulkarni (2018) discusses in her chapter about different collective-farming groups she met in Kerala, women have come together across caste and religion to collectively cultivate food. The Kudumbashree model promotes economic empowerment and encourages self-reliance, giving the groups autonomy in terms of managing the leased land and crops (for both the market and subsistence needs), as well as regarding the organisation of labour within the group (Abraham 2019). Although organic is not a prerequisite for farming collectives in India, as already discussed, there is an emphasis on the importance of safe, chemical-free food – as articulated both by the Kudumbashree scheme and the women farmers discussed by Kulkarni (2018). Similarly, in Tamil Nadu, Pande and Jha (2016) demonstrate that farming collectives engage in organic agriculture because it improves food security and, in the long term, food sovereignty too.

However, as Padmanabhan (2008) illustrates, the imposition of collective institutional structures designed to support the *economic* interests of farmers can erode existing collective activities such as seed sharing and the embodied and negotiated experiences of trust and reciprocity. The externally initiated institutional arrangements Padmanabhan (2008) observes in sustainable agriculture development initiatives in Kerala are tempered by gender hierarchies and gendered labour norms, thus contributing to silencing and devaluing women farmers'

4 PGSs are systems for certifying organic food and are designed to incentivise farmers to grow organically. They operate on the principles of local participation and organisation, trust and transparency. However, scholars such as Poerting (2015) have pointed to the conditioning processes which evolve under PGSs in Pakistan, where farmers must adhere to particular standards to be able to sell on international markets.

knowledge about agrobiodiversity. Collectivity in agriculture, therefore, reflects the complexity of social power dynamics in agricultural relations, with farming groups often conditioned by external institutional power dynamics – especially when institutions instigate the process (cf. Leder et al. 2019). Yet, despite undercurrents of economic and land inequality, collective agriculture enables interlinked negotiations at different scales. These negotiations challenge normalised social boundaries (Pande and Jha 2016), thus offering possibilities to counter narratives dictating who is considered a farmer, who is entitled to financial support and whose voice and knowledge matters.

Discursive effects of a 'growing organic world'

The sociolegal category and cultural imagination of the male, land-owning farmer is arguably not only conditioned through patriarchy, caste and class but also scientific representations of agriculture. Despite sustained activist and academic interventions, such representations rarely consider as valid or valuable the knowledges and perspectives of farmers themselves (Kloppenburg 1991). Hegemonies in what constitutes 'agricultural knowledge' result, 'Because it is reductive, abstracting, and interested in the immutable components of a phenomenon, science loses connection with variability of local systems' (Kloppenburg 1991, 530).

Thus, science constructs universal truths – or 'immutable mobiles'. This universalising principle, or the 'God Trick' as Haraway (1988) aptly describes it, makes an ethico-political claim upon agricultural knowledge. The scientific perspective is, however, assumed to be detached from politics and ecologies and can speak for agriculture everywhere, thus silencing situated, local and traceable knowledge claims. Scientific narratives of global 'ethical' food production, such as those that count and document organic agriculture, may therefore contribute to this process of silencing, despite their ethical intent. Although they give voice and space to alternative forms of agriculture and their associated ethical principles, they also conform to the logics of hegemonic ethics of productivism, universalism and economic growth in agriculture (cf. Puig de la Bellacasa 2015). In this section I try to tease out this seeming contradiction through a discourse analysis of annual reports on The World of Organic Agriculture.

Every year, FiBL and IFOAM - Organics International publish a report on 'The World of Organic Agriculture'. Statistics about global organic-agriculture production, land use and markets are gathered and presented in lengthy reports, often launched at the annual BIOFACH Congress. Here, global partners and networks working in organic and sustainable agriculture and food meet and strategise to improve the production and consumption of organic food. Importantly, the reports only gather data on *certified* organic food, therefore on that which can enter the global supply chain (see Schlatter et al. 2021, 32). This does not exclude small-scale farmers who sell food at local or national levels through schemes such as PGSs, but is unlikely to include data on subsistence farmers.

In the 2018 report, data collected in 2016 showed that 40 per cent of the world's certified organic producers were in Asia (Willer and Lernoud 2018, 23). Out of the 178 countries, which formed part of their annual global survey, India had the highest number of certified organic producers in the world with 835,000, followed by Uganda with 210,352 and Mexico with 210,000. In the 2021 report, data collected in 2019 revealed that these numbers had increased; Ethiopia was now in third place with 203,602 organic producers.[5] The 'organic market' is, however, situated elsewhere. The most recent data from 2019 (2021 report) indicates that the United States leads with an organic market worth 44.7 billion euros, Germany is second with one worth 12 billion euros and France is third with one worth 11.3 billion euros; when compared with the previous reports, this shows significant increases year on year. The partiality of these statistics rests on a number of issues, aside from the fact the reports only cover certified organic agriculture. The report outlines some of the reasons for this partiality itself:

> Reporting precise figures on the number of organic farms remains difficult as some countries:
>
> - report only the numbers of companies, projects, or grower groups, which may each comprise many individual producers;
> - do not provide data on the number of producers at all;
> - include collectors in case there are wild collection areas, and
> - provide the number of producers per crop, and there may be overlaps for those growers who grow several crops.
>
> The number of producers should, therefore, be treated with caution, and it may be assumed that the total number of organic producers is higher than that reported here. (Schlatter et al. 2021, 56)

It also highlights the significant problems with shifting categorisation by governments or the institutional apparatus which measures the statistics. They account for the dramatic decrease in numbers of organic producers in Mexico thus:

> There is a challenge with the number of producers in some countries, as some certifiers provide data on all producers, including smallholders, whereas other certifiers provide data on the certificates only. This problem became particularly marked in the case of Mexico, where the data source changed in 2018, and the new source did not include the smallholder farmers, resulting in a major drop of organic producers in Mexico and Latin America as a whole. (Schlatter et al. 2021, 56)

Categories such as land use become troublesome again when the report segregates out the different types thereof. In 2019, India records 2,299,222 hectares of land as 'organic agriculture' and 1,370,579 ha as 'organic wild collection' (including beekeeping areas). The land-use categories of 'Aqua-culture', 'Forest', 'Graze and

5 India recorded 1,366,226 organic producers and Uganda 210,353, respectively (Willer et al. 2021, 19).

Non-agricultural land' and 'Other non-agricultural land' remain empty, as do these chosen categories for the majority of the other countries studied in this report (see Table 9, in Schlatter et al. 2021, 52-54). The empty cells, the shifting and ambiguous nature of the categories themselves and the overarching criterion of 'certified' organic agriculture beg the question whose knowledge of agriculture and whose perception of what constitutes 'organic' creates and maintains these categories?

The sources of the data drawn upon to look at global trends of organic agriculture are significant here. Statistics on organic agriculture are collected from a variety of affiliates and government sources by Ecovia Intelligence (formerly Organic Monitor), a specialist research, consulting and training firm based in London, and by FiBL, the Swedish Organic Research Institute, as well as the report's various co-authors. For India, the statistical mappings of organic-food production are based upon statistics obtained from The Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority within the Government of India's Ministry of Commerce and Industry.

The accompanying narrative to these statistics describes the positive development of national certification programme 'Jaivik Bharat' across India, the increased adoption of PGSs and an increasing number of states such as Sikhim, Mizoram and Aurunachal Pradesh, as well as districts such as Kasargode in Kerala, making a declared commitment to organic agriculture (Willer and Lernoud 2018, 191). The 2018 report goes on to note that many regions in these states are remote and their farmers poor, with therefore no or little access to chemical fertilisers. In 2020, the report highlights that 'PGS-India certification' is being implemented across the country by the National Centre for Organic Agriculture within a new legal framework (Moura e Castro et al. 2021, 160). In the same report, Hossain et al. (2021, 201) discuss the possible inclusion of non-certified farmers in densely forested areas of North-East India, who are 'practicing organic agriculture by default.' Therefore, whilst offering insights into how class and ecologies shape the adoption of organic agriculture and how the practice is being supported by different state governments and schemes, there is no further discussion about the forms of organic agriculture existing outside of certification schemes.

In giving visibility to 'organic' agriculture and 'organic' markets, these reports draw on a set of ethical principles (health, ecology, fairness and care) supposedly imbibed in organic practices and agreed upon by the organic movement.[6] These ethical values are reinforced through the institutions guiding or leading the process of textual production, namely IFOAM - Organics International. As described in their report, they are a member-based organisation with 719 affiliates - with 79 in

6 The organic principles outlined and institutionalised by IFOAM - Organics International are discussed in a paper by Luttikholt (2007).

Germany, where the organisation is based (India itself has 52).[7] The organisation identifies their origins in the coming together of organic movements from different regions in 1972 (Luttikholt 2007), and are legitimised by their member base and their collaborative work with networks such as Fair Trade and Demeter. In 2018, IFOAM - Organics International reported they are now taking that movement into its third stage:

> Now the organic movement is entering a new phase that we call 'Organic 3.0'. Organic 3.0 positions organic as a modern, innovative system that has positive impacts on global environmental and social challenges. It is the overall strategic plan of the global organic movement for further growth and sustainable development in order to increase positive impacts on the planet and the people […]. There is a wide consensus that we need to move towards more sustainable agriculture and food systems and that business as usual is not an option any more. Agriculture, done differently, can be part of the solution […]. Organic agriculture, a dynamic and continuously developing farming system based on the science of agroecology, is a form of truly sustainable agriculture and offers practical solutions to address major global challenges. Organic agriculture and equally sustainable systems produce healthy, nutritious food and other natural products for a growing population. They enable farmers to earn a fair living, regenerate and enhance soil fertility and biodiversity, safeguard and replenish scarce water resources, mitigate climate change, and help people, who have been negatively impacted by climate change, to adapt to it and become more resilient. (Arbenz 2018, 320–321)

The moralities embodied in the values of sustainability, fairness and resilience to climate change (Arora-Jonsson 2011; Srinivasan 2017) shares the discursive space with the values of global market development and an 'emerging markets' discourse herein:

> More than a fifth of the world's organic agricultural land, 15.1 million hectares, is located in countries listed on the DAC list […]. The organic share of the total agricultural land of the top ten countries on the DAC list is comparable to that of many European countries, and they can be attributed in part to a high production potential for, and focus on, exports. (Schlatter et al. 2021, 69)[8]

At first glance, these discourses on values seem to be in contradiction: the first paragraph evoking organic agriculture as a change of direction away from 'business as usual' and the second outlining the 'high production potential' for export commodities originating from organic farmland in developing countries. It is arguably this oscillation or slippage between these different narratives however, that enables the reports to make global claims. Replaying colonial histories of categorisation as a way of knowing and seeing the world from a distance (Haraway 1988), these generalisations and narratives of markets and producers arguably feed

7 Affiliation seems to shift annually, these numbers are as per their 2021 report (Willer et al. 2021, 19). The organisation is based in Bonn.

8 DAC refers to the country list of the Development Assistance Committee, available online at: http://www.oecd.org/dac/stats/daclist.htm.

into a ‘regime of representation’ which works upon uneven flows of food and power (Escobar 1994; Freidberg 2010a) – an argument I will come back to below.

These glimpses into the discursive spaces of institutions representing and supporting organic agriculture, and the movements associated with it, illustrate how the numbers and narratives, which accompany the description of global food-trade systems can, on the one hand, absorb alternative food and farming practices (such as organic) to serve a particular ethical claim. On the other, the quantification of these flows through statistical representations, which count ‘productive’ bodies and land conceals a wider understanding of the struggles and lived realities of agricultural communities. As feminist scholars of commodities and agriculture, Ramamurthy (2000) and Freidburg (2010) have demonstrated, the partiality of the narratives created has little to do with supposedly apolitical market rationales or apolitical shifts in government categorisation of farmers. Rather it has more to do with political regimes of representation, geopolitical manoeuvring and gendered and racialised production norms helping maintain cheap labour and high consumption rates (on the political and ethical negotiations over the trading of sugar between Europe and the Carribean, see Richardson-Ngwenya 2012).

Teasing out the entanglements of French green-bean commodity chains between Burkina Faso, Zambia, Paris and London with inscribed colonial histories of taste and freshness, Freidberg (2010b) highlights how and why these continuities continue to condition food export markets. Furthermore, she notes the extreme levels of control supermarkets have over processes of food production (Freidberg 2007). The concept of freshness, she argues, is a recent phenomenon which coincided with global refrigerated-transport means and advertising campaigns for ‘healthy’, vitamin-rich foods such as lettuce and oranges. However, the global food chains through which ‘fresh’ produce travelled were themselves not new but were well-trodden trade routes from the colonial-era (Freidberg 2010b).

These dynamics point to the ways in which uneven historical processes affect social meaning-making in relation to food and farming. Arguably, the meanings and values of FiBL and IFOAM - Organics International’s annual reports, although rooted within the ethical values arising from ‘organic pioneers’, continue to work within uneven economic systems which obscure the caring labour of close and distant others (Tronto 1993, 114), the labouring bodies and landscapes cultivating food. In India, the discourse of a ‘growing organic world’ therefore sits uncomfortably with a deepening agricultural crisis occurring there (see Pandey and Sengupta 2018) – the extent of which is made visible through the voices of widow and women farmers (Padhi 2012; MAKAAM and MSCW 2016; EPWEngage 2018; Bais et al. 2019; MAKAAM 2020). Furthermore, this ethical premise of ‘organic’ is brought into a universalist frame of recognition, thus producing a discourse which silences agricultural heterogeneity and the situatedness of organic farming as a diverse practice.

Bringing together the discursive representations of the report with the struggles of India's agricultural communities highlights the contradictions that arise when celebrating and making visible a 'growing organic world' without questioning the uneven flows of knowledge and power upon which its ethical claims rest. Without wanting to overstate the discursive power of these reports, this paper sheds light on the ways in which such ethical discourses about food and agriculture can contribute to acts of silencing, collapse historical power dynamics and therewith help maintain unequal global food-trade networks (Richardson-Ngwenya 2012). Their use of narrow categories, as discussed above, demonstrates how the heterogeneity of organic farmers and knowledges is flattened through such discursive manoeuvres. These processes, I argue, can be understood as biopolitical regimes of representation (Escobar 1994).

Biopolitical regimes of representation

'Regimes of representation' seek to legitimise colonial and developmentalist logics and worldviews (Escobar 1994), which maintain the 'frames of recognition' through which bodies, places and practices come to matter (or not) (Butler 2016). Agricultural regimes of representation in India, as Bhattacharya (2019) shows, are shaped by colonial imaginations of the 'agrarian' and related processes of ordering, counting and controlling people and landscapes. These forms of 'knowing', and the practices that emerged from them, were not only about the 'improvement' of agriculture but also intimately entangled with the perceived moral 'upliftment' of colonial subjects (Pandian 2009).

Motivated by the exploitation of distant lands, humans and non-humans, these processes continue to echo in contemporary economic imperialisms, such as via the persisting inequities in food production and consumption between the Global North and Global South – as discussed by Patnaik and Patnaik (2017) – as well as in imbalances of power in trade agreements – as discussed by Richardson-Ngwenya (2012). Although the narratives of an organic world discussed here perhaps do not structure trade agreements, I argue that they continue to produce universalisms about agriculture, which are embedded in an ethical premise and yet echo colonial ways of seeing. More specifically, they render invisible the heterogeneity of agricultural practice in India, as well as the struggles of its farmers. Thus what 'comes to matter' as a result of these narratives are the numbers illustrating a growing organic world and not the lives of farmers themselves.

Colonial practices of counting, categorisation and seeing have long been identified and analysed by postcolonial and feminist scholars, who have untangled the layers of disciplining and control these processes enabled (Mohanty 1984; Appadurai 1996; Mbembe 2003; Nandy 2009; Lugones 2010; Said 2016). Such forms of counting and categorisation involved various techniques like cadastral mapping, anthropological surveys and population censuses (Pels 1997; Rabinow 2014). These land- and human-mapping techniques demonstrate the centrality of the

numerical gaze in the colonial imagination, which, as Appadurai (1996) contends, flattens human experience – obscuring complex agricultural relations, and disciplining bodies and landscapes into subjects of a seemingly ordered colonial regime. These critiques, and the centrality of numbers and categories in the colonial gaze, illustrate how statistical representations form a key part of colonial histories. Of course, this is not to say that *all* statistical representations are colonial. However, in relation to contemporary processes shaped by histories of colonialism (such as food trade and agriculture) they continue to reproduce imperialisms in the economic relations established between the Global North and Global South (Patnaik and Patnaik 2017).

I refer to 'biopolitics' here as the entangled webs of power relations that negotiate shifting constellations of power over life, or the regulation of 'bios' in particular contexts or a given milieu (Foucault 2003, 245). Complex and historically constituted, these relations, Foucault (2003, 243) argues, configure human populations as a political problem, which requires regulation. Building on this, Mbembe (2003) articulated the concept of 'necropolitics' to understand the colonial logics that underpin a perceived 'right to kill', perpetuating a notion of sovereignty based upon a morality exclusive to imperial nation states – one which continues in contemporary justifications for war. This necropolitics is interwoven together by colonial logics and imaginaries, as Mbembe describes:

> *Colonial occupation* itself was a matter of seizing, delimiting, and asserting control over a physical geographical area—of writing on the ground a new set of social and spatial relations. The writing of new spatial relations (territorialization) was, ultimately, tantamount to the production of boundaries and hierarchies, zones and enclaves; the subversion of existing property arrangements; the classification of people according to different categories; resource extraction; and, finally, the manufacturing of a large reservoir of cultural imaginaries. These imaginaries gave meaning to the enactment of differential rights to differing categories of people for different purposes within the same space; in brief, the exercise of sovereignty. Space was therefore the raw material of sovereignty and the violence it carried with it. Sovereignty meant occupation, and occupation meant relegating the colonized into a third zone between subjecthood and objecthood. (Membe 2003, 24-25)[9]

This confluence of control over space and bodies is also reflected in Nally's (2010) argument about state-led food provisioning: namely, that the Foucauldian axis of 'make live' (colonisers and natural resources deemed useful for expansionism) and 'let die' (colonial human and non-human subjects) was biopolitical in that it violently excluded forms of life not considered part of *the* population (see also, Cavanagh 2014). If we turn again to the paper's overarching context, biopolitics can, therefore, be understood as denoting the web of power relations which entangles and regulates food (and bodies), subtly shaping how this commodity is produced, traded and consumed. The maintenance of these power relations

9 Emphasis in original.

arguably rests on a necropolitics which sustains racialised hierarchies within the global food-trade system, as informed by processes of social, spatial and legal division – particularly between what was considered 'human' and 'in-human' in the colonial gaze (Yusoff 2018).

These colonial continuities in global food-trade and economic systems are reflected in the category of 'Producers' in the FiBL and IFOAM - Organics International reports, because they sustain a biopolitical regime of representation which benefits from homogenous and quantifiable people and agriculture. In doing so, these categories – and the reporting they enable – silence both the struggles of agricultural communities and the multiplicity of agricultural alternatives, therewith reproducing normativities that condition who is considered a farmer.

Although the embodied experience of 'farmer' is framed by multiple intersecting social positions (including gender, class and caste), the FiBL and IFOAM - Organics International reports refer to the category of certified organic 'Producers' and in India they are grouped into two forms of production: 'Agriculture' and 'Wild Collection'. Although the reports warn us of incomplete numbers, there is no discussion on who is considered a farmer in India (or elsewhere). As exemplified by the experiences of women farmers discussed earlier as well as the ongoing work of grassroots organisations, due to women being excluded from this sociolegal category, the numbers presented in the report are doubly dubious. Arguably, if read the reports from a feminist perspective, the numbers and categories reveal more about who they exclude than about who they count.

However, whilst these biopolitical regimes of representation around food, farming and global trade condition the utilised categories for people, thereby governing who and what constitutes a 'productive organic farmer', farmers, traders and consumers also shape how these categories play out in everyday life. Thinking with biopolitics beyond a process of *governing* and *regulating* life, are there other constellations of power which can challenge how states and societies shape what forms of life come to matter? In rejecting a biopolitics based upon layers of exclusion and exploitation, is it possible to imagine one acknowledging and informing multiple modes of living *with* human and non-human life, not simply control *over*? For Puig de la Bellacasa, an alterbiopolitics displaces 'contemporary biopolitics' reduction to the preservation of human life' and confronts dominant 'biopowers by creating different forces of world-making relationalities' (2017, 165). Although scholars such as Cavanagh (2014) have argued that biopolitics is about the interrelation of species and is thus a more-than-human assemblage, the concept of alterbiopolitics offers a reconfiguration of *care* as an ethico-political practice within more-than-human worlds.

This practice assists in the earlier-mentioned re-mattering of worlds and things, which have until now been devalued as inert, inhuman or an exploitable substance (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, 23). This re-mattering runs counter to 'the hegemonic ethics' of a technoscience which legitimises narratives of progress and practices of

exclusion, moving towards an ethics 'embedded in the basic aspects of sustaining and fostering life at its most corporeal levels of naturecultural interdependency' (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, 22). Alterbiopolitical possibilities can be exemplified, Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) argues, in alternative forms of agriculture such as permaculture, which challenge the pace and ideologies of dominant market-orientated and technoscientific food production. Therefore, permaculture as a 'naturecultural' practice begins from an 'an awareness of their more-than-human dependency' (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, 167), thus decentring human bodies and the 'focus on the perpetuation of life *as* human' (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, 22). Similarly, Kozhisseri and Rajan argue that nomadic agricultural practices can be understood as a 'feminist politics of the earth' (2020, xx), consequently unravelling dualisms of nature/culture, human/non-human and challenging the dominant norms of sedentary agriculture.

Rather than a new or novel way of being in the world, alternative farming practices such as permaculture, nomadic agriculture or collective organic agriculture – ones which in essence relate to slower, more circular workings of time (or 'soil time') and relational practices of care – have been devalued and made invisible by technoscientific logics of time, food production and progress (Puig de la Bellacasa 2015). It is arguably because these alternatives operate within modes of slowness, mutuality and interdependency, and thus sit in opposition to expansionism and individualism, that they have been silenced by colonialism, capitalism and developmentalist logics. The consequences of which are now seen in the endurance of uneven power dynamics within global food-trade systems.

In South India, collective organic farming practices arguably offer a window onto the ways in which women farmers are contributing to the re-mattering of agricultural knowledges and labours, which are concealed by the different layers of biopolitical regimes of representation discussed here. Farming collectives in South India have, as noted, diverse organisational structures and motivations, operating for both the market and to meet subsistence needs and growing both organically and with chemicals. Therefore, farmers' ethical relationships with the land and the food they grow differ, reflecting the heterogeneity of agricultural practices. *Organic* agricultural collectives however, I argue, in particular contribute to a re-mattering of agriculture through using organic and collective practices. Combined, this constellation of political and ethical acts challenges the norms serving to subjugate women farmers, particularly widows, denying them recognition as a farmer. As Pande and Jha (2016) demonstrate, organic agriculture is adopted by women's farming collectives because it improves food security and safety for them and their families, as well as due to awareness of the ethical concerns related to the environments in which they live and work.

Although collective engagements are not innocent, being enmeshed with ambiguities and hierarchies (Leder et al. 2019), heterogeneous agricultural and collective practices question patriarchal, caste and economic systems. Thus, they

counter the sociolegal category of the male, landowning 'farmer' and challenge normative notions of 'agricultural practice', such as the individual farmer and dependency on chemicals to produce food. This mutuality of care for social and ecological life in collective organic agriculture is not a dichotomy, even if it may seem so when reproduced on the page. Rather, it is a naturecultural, ethico-political entanglement of farmers, the landscape and food consumption, one cultivating an alterbiopolitics of food; a re-mattering of agricultural communities and landscapes.

Conclusion

This paper began with the struggles of agricultural communities in India, particularly women farmers. Bringing organic agriculture collectivity to the forefront of analysis, I attempted to situate the discourse of a 'growing organic world' within the ethico-political practices of 'absent' forms of agriculture and 'absent' farmers, which I argue are silenced through biopolitical regimes of representation (Escobar 1994; De Sousa Santos 2018). In thinking through the inner workings of the statistical and narrative representations of the annual reports issued by FiBL and IFOAM - Organics International, this paper has attempted to elucidate tensions which go beyond a report and into historic sites of struggle and exploitation, and then back again to the current struggles of communities in South India. In doing so, this paper sought to weave together critical analysis of global ethical-food discourses with insights from situated ethical practices of agricultural communities in South India. In thinking *with* the alterbiopolitics of women's farming collectives, the silences scientific and ethical discourses produce were examined – demonstrating the importance of interrogating who decides exactly what comes to matter; what is considered ethical.

The narratives and numbers of global organic markets illustrated in these reports paint a 'growing organic world' which connotes an ethical 'good' and yet flattens complex agricultural realities, ignores the entangled food histories of colonial exploitation and potentially silences ongoing agricultural distress. The ethical claims imbibed in these narratives only make the contradiction more visceral, which led me to ask the question 'ethical for whom?' In highlighting the colonial continuities within these narratives, practices of counting and ways of seeing and knowing, the paper demonstrated how narratives which hide the complexity of agricultural alternatives and struggles feed into biopolitical regimes of representation. This potentially makes invisible diverse agricultural practices, particularly small-scale, marginal farmers – including women and widowed farmers who often do not produce for global markets and are not certified organic.

This brief archaeology of an ethical discourse of organic food and agriculture has enabled a comparison with the local discursivities which have been subjugated through such regimes of representation (Foucault 1980, 85). Further work on a genealogy of these knowledges would be necessary to understand their historical constitution. This would also enable a closer look at their importance in

denaturalising 'claims of a unitary body of theory which would filter, hierarchise and order them in the name of some true knowledge and some arbitrary idea of what constitutes a science and its objects' (Foucault 1980, 86). In order to conceptualise what constitutes the ethical in relation to food and agriculture I followed Puig de la Bellacasa, who argues that the frame 'alterbiopolitics' enables us to think beyond the ethical – '[as] arising out of moral principles – such as contracts or promises – to be embedded in vital material forces involved in the constraints of everyday continuation and maintenance of life' (2017, 22).

Collective forms of organic agriculture in India aim to tackle systemic injustices, attending to the multiple layers thereof, which women as well as other marginal farmers often face. Through various constellations of collective labour, agricultural practice, as well as government or non-governmental organisation support, collectives are simultaneously farming the land, producing food and questioning the dominant narratives and categories articulated by the state, the market and industrial agriculture. The multiplicity, messiness and heterogeneity of these situated agricultural practices and socioecological relations signal a constellation of alterbiopolitics which constitutes a re-mattering of these ethical practices and relations, serving to counter dominant biopowers of categorisation and exploitation in agriculture – despite the narratives and representations which exclude and silence them.[10]

Subsumed within a global food-trade system maintained by colonial continuities, the ethical narratives and categories of 'organic agriculture' feed into biopolitical representations of a 'growing organic world'. This obscures the agricultural communities which give life to the very idea. As an ethico-political practice, collective agriculture challenges the systemic injustices at the nexus of colonialism, patriarchy and capitalism, which continue to devalue agriculture and more-than-human caring practices. This, I argue, represents a re-mattering of the care and situated knowledges that constitute agricultural worlds; a re-mattering of agriculture.

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10 Although I have discussed the ethico-political practices exemplified by the particular women's organic farming collectives featured in the existing ethnographic work drawn upon for this paper, further work is needed into the everyday ethical dynamics of collective farming in India, which this paper has not been able to give justice to.

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