Wayanad is a land of rolling hills, dense forests and generational farms, located in the state of Kerala in the southern part of India. From the outside it seems like a beautiful place to raise a family but the land is not the same as it was 20 years ago, and neither is the world. For the past 15 years, Wayanad has faced an agrarian crisis. With changes in the economy and climate, farmers are left with empty pockets. These events have affected their family structures and the livelihoods of their children. Farmers have come to the conclusion that their children need to find a different profession other than facing the struggles of a farmer.

The farmers of Wayanad are from several different backgrounds; some came as settlers in the 1930s, while others come from tribal communities, known as the Adivasi, who have lived off the land for centuries. The farming culture of Wayanad changed in the late twentieth century when farmers turned away from their traditional methods to using fertilizers, pesticides and hybrids in order to increase production of crops for greater profit. Things were good for several years and demand for spices grown were at an all time high until the market crashed in the late nineties. Since then, farmers continue to rise at 4am every morning to do the only job they have ever had, with a return of much less. However, lessons have been learned. Farmers have begun to go back to traditional and organic methods of farming to preserve the land they do have. They also have realized the importance of money management. But lastly, the understanding (and with it comes frustration) that the government may not help them out as much as the need.

The youth flight from the community of Wayanad is not uncommon by any means but there are still youth that believe there is a future despite their parents’ thoughts. Time will tell about the fate of these farmlands in Wayanad, as well as rest of the generational farms around the world, as society and its views towards the environment and agriculture continue to change.
FARMING - A thing of the past

As many struggle to make ends meet on their farms, they are encouraging their children to abandon the profession that has been in their family for generations.

By Brittany Trevick

Giant, brightly colored homes line the dusty streets of Wayanad, India. Stained wood borders the doors and windows, into which it’s possible to see large, half-empty rooms.

But amongst this show of wealth, paint spots are missing on the walls and unfinished construction is visible. Roof tiles are missing and cracks can be seen on many of the walls.

These homes are a perfect paradox of the life in Wayanad. Once a haven for successful farming, it is now the location of many suicides and massive debt.

“The next GENERATION cannot sustain on agriculture. It’s not practical. Crops are failing.”

According to T.G. Jacob, the author of Wayanad: Misery in an Emerald Bowl, before the 1960s, the Wayanad District — located in Northern Kerala, in the South-West of India — indigenous people, called the Adivasi, populated the land. But after that time period, settlers from around Kerala and South India migrated to the area and began cultivating cash crops, which are grown for profit.

The community experienced prosperity during the 1980s through the sale of high-priced pepper and coffee. Farmers took out large loans and did not put any money into agricultural investment. The prices of these crops eventually crashed and the farmers have been struggling ever since. Thirty years later, the prices of agricultural input have increased by 150 percent and the cost of labor by 100 percent.

The Green Valley group agreed labor is one of the main causes for their lack of hope in the future of farming.

And while the farming population continues to work on their land, many of them are encouraging their children to receive an education and leave the mountainous area. These farmers believe there is no future in the career they have dedicated their lives to.

“The next generation cannot sustain on agriculture,” said Mathew, a Wayanad farmer and member of Green Valley, a farming self-help group in the area. “It’s not practical. Crops are failing.”

Mathew had eight brothers to work the field when he was a child, but with only three children himself, there are not enough hands to help.

And paying for labor is something that is nearly impossible. Labor can cost as much as 300-400 rupees per day. According to Mathew, farmers spend 100 rupees on their field per day, but only get back 25 rupees — about 50 cents in American currency.

P.V. Mathew, another farmer in the Green Valley group, agreed with Mathew and said the only way to fix the current farming situation in Wayanad is to go back to the large families of the past.

“Farmers should have more children,” P.V. Mathew said. “Two are not enough. Otherwise, everyone will leave. If you have three to four children, some are likely to stay and take care of the farm and their parents.”

P.V. Mathew has two children. His son, 28, is a mechanical engineer in Tokyo, while his daughter, 22, is a software engineer in Bangalore.

The 53-year-old originally encouraged his children to leave, but said sometimes the decision saddens him.

“Farmers should have more children,” P.V. Mathew said. “The next generation cannot sustain on agriculture.”

“The children are providing us with all of the material benefits by leaving, but I have lost the connection with them,” he said. “I feel terrible. There is a lot of trauma. There are no kids to take care of us anymore.”

But the pepper farmer with a graying buzz cut, a thick, dark mustache and warm, brown eyes, said this is a small sadness compared to the pride he has for his children in leaving the farming profession.

“I’m very happy my children reached a good place in life,” he said. “I’m sad when my wife and I have difficulties, but it is a temporary sorrow. Overall, I am proud.”

But while the farmers of the Green Valley group encourage their children to seek different employment, other local Wayanad farmers believe their children will return to the farm.

Varghese — a tall mustached man with a high widow’s peak — has three children, all of whom have left the farm to pursue other careers. According to Varghese, their total monthly salary combined is roughly 147,000 rupees — or $2,940 American dollars. Varghese said he would be lucky to ever have even 60,000 rupees as the balance in his account. But even with this low income, the 62-year-old said he believes his children will one day return to the forests of Wayanad.

“A farmer teaches his child at the age of four onwards how to farm. At 22, they leave but could still come back,” he said. “I am hopeful that my children will come back because farming gives satisfaction. I think that once they get financial security they will come back.”

The market crashes, many farmers unable to pay back loans

Over 150,000 farmers committed suicides due to debt

Today, farming has become unprofitable and has resulted in many youth leaving the area.
Raman, another local Wayanad farmer, said he also thinks the children could return, but they might not be able to work as hard as their parents and ancestors. “If the next generation comes back, they will focus not on farming, but on building houses,” he said. “They won’t sacrifice. They want things to come easier and they won’t be doing the hard work the farmers are used to.”

Raman blamed the poor decisions of farmers and government officials for the current farming situation.

“For thousands of years, Mother Earth has taken care of society,” Raman said. “But because of greed and the exploitation of the Earth, she is taking her response and corrective action by creating diseases and the changing of the climate.”

Deva Prakash, the only member of the group who does not hope for the return of his children, said another problem in the world of farming is the attitudes other people have towards those who work in the fields.

“I finished high school in 1974,” Prakash said. “But because I am a farmer I am not seen as moving up in the world. I do not intend to send my children into agriculture because there is no future in agriculture. Farmers in Kerala don’t get a life of dignity. They don’t get respect in society. Farmers are seen as uneducated and as an uncultivated people, though they actually have a lot of experience.”

Regardless, of their beliefs, both groups agreed their children will have an effect on what happens next with both the farm and the region of Wayanad.

“There have been generations and generations of farmers in my family,” said P.V. Mathew. “But it’s ending with me.”

Cash Crops of Wayanad

1) Black Pepper
2) Vanilla Bean
3) Rubber
4) Coffee Beans
5) Tapioca
6) Cash crops drying

Photo credits for 1-5: Janessa Hageman
Photo 6: Brittany Trevick
Resisting the farming decline

By Sam Louwagie

Santosh heard the warnings throughout his entire childhood.

Over and over, his parents told him to avoid a life in agriculture. He was too smart, they told him. He should leave Wayanad, go to college, and earn a consistent, reliable livelihood. He heard it so often that, eventually, he believed it.

But as a child, Santosh (featured as the second male on the right) had a natural attraction to farming that drove him to wake up at seven o’clock each morning to take care of his father’s cattle. “In the morning, when my father used to break for breakfast, I was out in the field with the cows,” Santosh said.

Despite that interest, Santosh grew up and heeded his parents’ wishes. He left the farm to earn an undergraduate degree. Ironically, that decision to escape a life in agriculture would eventually bring him back to farming — with ideas of fundamentally changing it.

Bright young farm children like Santosh are being encouraged by their parents to leave Wayanad in droves. One local farmer said at this rate, there could be no children left on the farms five years from now.

“It is inevitable that anyone who goes into agriculture will fail,” said Matthew, a Wayanad farmer.

Deva prakash, a leading local farmer, sent his three grown children away to earn higher wages for a better standing in the world. “Farmers don’t get dignity or respect in society,” Prakash said. “Society treats them as if they are ignorant and uneducated. People look down on them. As long as farmers don’t get respect, I don’t want my children to go into that line of work.

Santosh heard similar things from his parents, who needed to work manual labor to supplement the income from their two to three acres of farmland. So he went to school in order to pick up professional skills.

At school, however, a professor gave him a job working in the farmland on her property. Near that land was a little school called Kanavu. Santosh soon found his way over to the school and began playing the role of a teacher.

He’s still there. And the 27-year old said he has no plans or desires to go anywhere else.

Currently serving about 50 students, Kanavu lets children pick their own specialties to study. There is one subject, however, on which everyone at the unconventional school has to spend at least two hours per day: agriculture.

And they aren’t learning to enter the rapidly declining Wayanad food market.

Kanavu is challenging a shift in Wayanad over the past 10-15 years toward cash crop farming, in which a farmer grows only one product and sells it. The school believes that practice is harming Wayanad farm life. So it teaches its students to grow and consume their own food, which Kanavu teachers say reduces dependence on out-of-state imports and is better for the land.

The school also grows all of its own food. Tomatoes, beans, papaya, bananas and other fruit grow in picturesque rows around the school, ensuring it doesn’t need to buy any food from the outside world.

“I don’t see agriculture as a livelihood at all,” said Arun, a Kanavu teacher. “As I see it, everyone who eats food has a responsibility and a duty to grow food, to be connected to the food, to the land in which food is being grown.”
That philosophy stems from a play written in 1993 by K.J. Baby, the founder of Kanavu, called *Nadugadhika*.

*Nadugadhika* advocates for self-sustainable farming. A character in the play says, “Ain’t you ashamed of yourselves? The whole country is in the grip of famine. And do you know what our Mahatma Gandhi eats one day? A single plantain. Then why cannot you be satisfied with the fruits and roots from the forests? Go, go and eat what you can rummage.”

When Santosh began studying and teaching at Kanavu and read Baby’s work, he was elated. After having had to let go of his early passion for farming, he had seemingly stumbled upon a way to make it work.

“‘Oh my god, this is all possible,’ he recalls thinking. ‘This is exactly what I would like to have.’ It was a sense of excitement.”

In addition to eating healthier food, being independent from market forces, and taking better care of the land, the Kanavu model of farming has psychological benefits, Santosh said. Even dejected Wayanad farmers who declare there to be “no future” in the business say that one of its underappreciated aspects is the sense of pride and connection to the land it brings. Growing food for oneself, Santosh claims, only enhances that sense. He said there is “alienation” and “disconnect” present when a farmer grows food to sell to somebody else.

Arun said Kanavu’s way of farming used to be common. He said Kanavu hopes to act as a guide toward making it so again. “People farmed to live. They did not live for farming,” Arun said. “We try to use the land for just what is required for food. Trying to live within what we need.”

The school does not actively spread its message, however. Santosh said if he worries about what other people are doing, what he wants will only disappoint and frustrate him. The school will continue to act as a model of self-sustainable farming for those who want to follow it, and will teach its methods to its handful of students. But beyond that, Santosh said, there isn’t much it can do.

“Everybody has their own ways of living and thinking. What I can do best is lead a life and practice the principles I have seen.

What others do is up to them.”
This publication is the culmination of three weeks of fieldwork in Bangalore and Wayanad, India. It has been produced by a team of three UI student journalists, members of the first group from SJMC to go to India on a Study Abroad course. In this publication they have captured the contrasts of development in two ways – farming crisis in the lush and fertile region of Wayanad, and generational contrasts in fears and hopes for the future of farming.

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We gratefully acknowledge all the help given by Visthar and RASTA in India toward this publication.