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Belonging and Rootedness in Gudalur, Nilgiris**

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Sedentarising Conservation: The Politics of Belonging and Rootedness in Gudalur, Nilgiris

Ajit Menon and Manasi Karthik*

Abstract

The landscape of Gudalur has been shaped and re-shaped by multiple waves of in- and out-migration that date back to the mid-19th century. The political-economic imperatives for these phases of migration have ranged from the development of capitalist relations within the estate economy to the compulsions of the Grow More Food Campaign to the political repatriation of 'Indian' Tamils from erstwhile Ceylon. Notwithstanding this history of in-migration in the making of Gudalur, the politics of 'rootedness' has become central to the governance and management of natural resources. In the recent past, attempts to convert prior zamindari systems of land tenure to ryotwari, recognise forest rights and establish tiger reserves have all employed heuristics of belonging. A significant body of literature exists that critiques the sedentarist metaphysics of rootedness from both social and ecological perspectives, paying attention in particular to the discursive and material limits of essentialised readings of the local. This paper focuses on how the politics of the local in Gudalur has been tied to the sedentarisation of conservation. It highlights how the making of environmental subjectivities has necessitated rendering these variegated pasts as singular and how legal definitions render liminal spaces (between forest and non-forest, Adivasi and non-Adivasi, legality and the illegal) bounded.

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Saif's¹ grandfather came to Aratuparai, a small hamlet in O'Valley, Gudalur,² Nilgiris, from present-day Kerala in 1912 when a *kangani*³ from his 'native' village recruited him to work on Manjushree Estate. His father worked there as well before encroaching on two acres (0.81 hectare) of estate land during the Grow More Food Campaign (mid-1940s to mid-1950s) where he cultivated tapioca, ragi and paddy. Saif, who is now 60 years old, was born in Gudalur and continues to cultivate a share of his father's land albeit mostly with tea. Balakrishnan is a year older than Saif and lives about 20 kilometres away in Kundaladi, Nellakottai, another region of Gudalur. His father came to Gudalur during the Grow More Food Campaign and purchased three acres of land where he cultivated millet, ragi and tobacco. Like Saif, Balakrishnan too cultivates mostly tea these days.

There are many Saifs and Balakrishnans in Gudalur. While their families have travelled pasts, they are resolute in their rootedness to Gudalur. The hilly, tea-dominated landscape of Gudalur is their home: it is where they say they belong. Their emphasis on rootedness and consequently belonging are acts of positioning (Li 2000) aimed at preventing themselves from being evicted and making claims to the benefits of state policies. Malkki (1992), in her now well-cited article on 'sedentarist metaphysics', argued that the individual's need to be rooted must be understood in a context where territorialised identities are naturalised and privileged while mobile ones deemed aberrant. Implicit in Malkki's argument was the contention that rootedness (i.e. being in a place for a long time and hence developing roots) is tantamount to belonging in a place. We suggest, in the context of Gudalur, that the state's notion of 'who belongs' has historically not been linked to how rooted people are but on fulfilling priorities of statemaking (Sivaramakrishnan 1999),⁴ most notably the building of a plantation economy, the promotion of agriculture and the settling of 'Indian'⁵ Tamils repatriated from Sri Lanka (erstwhile Ceylon till 1972). Territorialised rooted identities have become important recently in Gudalur in the context of forest conservation and people's entitlements to forestland; people and communities, in other words, must now demonstrate rootedness in terms of time and/or affective ties to nature in order to make claims to forestlands they consider theirs.

In this paper, we move through the temporalities that have shaped relations — both human and non-human — in Gudalur to highlight rootedness as a relatively recent entrant that has been just one marker of belonging in processes of statemaking in Gudalur. To do this, we examine the history of migration and land use practices to complicate ahistorical discourses of pristine and imagined forested pasts (Morrison and Lycett 2014). This is necessary to situate the sedentarist metaphysics we find in Gudalur today within a territorialised conservation ethic that determines who can belong in these landscapes. We illustrate how actors in Gudalur have either laid claims to such sedentarist metaphysics or challenged and resisted them.

The politics of rootedness raises important questions about how both social and ecological landscapes in ‘conservation zones’ such as Gudalur are constructed (Forsyth and Walker 2008). Gudalur, from being home to the Mudumalai Wildlife Sanctuary and National Park in the 1940s itself, has increasingly been envisaged as part of a much larger conservation landscape. People’s rootedness has been assessed according to how they fit into such a landscape. Our aim is not to negate the importance of conservation as a discursive category but rather to suggest that sedentarised imaginations of conservation are potentially limiting, both ecologically and socially. By locating sedentarised conservation in processes of statemaking, we examine the changing face of state-led conservation and its exclusions.

1. Migratory Pasts

Advocates of a sedentarist metaphysics narrativise Gudalur’s past and present in ways that suggest a virginal pristine forest with original inhabitants. However, in actual fact, Gudalur has been shaped and re-shaped by migratory pasts (Adams 1989). From non-sedentary Adivasis to warring fiefdoms seeking to usurp each other’s territories to colonial mobilisations, people for long periods of time have been on the move in the making of Gudalur. As Morrison and Lycett (2014: 99) argue in the context of the Nilgiris (in which Gudalur is located), ‘thinking about forest transitions is enormously helpful for activating a

more complex understanding of landscapes because it helps overcome socio-ecological amnesia by placing successions and transitions in palpable and recent histories’.

Perhaps the most significant movement of people and transformation of the ‘forested’ landscapes of Gudalur began in the 19th century with the clearing of jungles to establish coffee plantations. As Krishnan (2009) and Menon et al. (2013) have argued, the process of colonial statemaking in Gudalur was distinct from much of the Madras Presidency. In this case, the colonial state preferred to establish itself indirectly in many parts of Gudalur, allowing local *jenmis* (landlords) ownership of the land, and claiming only taxes on cultivated produce.⁶ In 1845, the Nilambur Kovilakam, a *jenmi* who would eventually own almost 40,000 hectares in the region, leased land to J.H. Ouchterlony. Close to 50 per cent of current Gudalur was under the control of *jenmis* in the 19th century, most significantly the Nilambur Kovilakam.⁷ *Jenmis* leased out *janmam* lands to British (and ‘native’) capitalists interested in cultivating coffee. Later, these plantation owners switched over to tea because coffee was ridden with disease. The British benefited from the emergence of an estate economy through a land tax that they collected on coffee- and tea-bearing land (Menon et al. 2013: 455) What distinguished *janmam* from non-*janmam* lands was that the former belonged fully to the proprietor of the land who could create subordinate rights to that land, whereas non-*janmam* lands were lands that had been escheated by the British (Krishnan 2009: 295).

Of importance to us is that this phase of statemaking resulted in large numbers of people coming to Gudalur to work mostly on these British estates (*janmam* lands). Wherever it operated, in its colonial construction of a primitive subjectivity, the colonial state deemed indigenes as an inadequate labour force for their newly established plantation regimes. In Gudalur this meant that both Adivasis as well as the Moundaden Chetties, who interestingly are today not granted the Scheduled Tribe status,⁸ were not preferred plantation labour although, as Ravi Raman (1991) highlights, Adivasis did work as plantation labour because the British imposed restrictions

on their shifting cultivation. Adivasis were also employed variously as elephant trainers or hunters (Munster 2014). The colonial state, therefore, set about mobilising large forces of labour from across the territories over which it presided (Ravi Raman 1991). Such mobile labour forces, rendered precarious by the nature of their mobility, formed part of the ordering logics of colonial plantations given that they were more ‘manageable’ in the eyes of colonial bureaucrats (Bremner 1996). Needless to say, this meant poor working conditions with many workers being indentured (Ravi Raman 1991: 247). Labour contractors, known as *maistries* or *kanganis*, would travel through villages beating drums and making offerings of silver so as to recruit destitute families. Such labour recruitment continued well into the 20th century.⁹ Although many of the labourers stayed on these lands only for a few months every year because of the threat of malaria, others chose to settle there permanently. With the government making a concerted effort to tackle malaria, in-migration to estates picked up rapidly towards the mid-1950s (Adams 1989: 321).

Gudalur continued to be the destination of migrants for other reasons too. In a sense, as in the case of forest frontiers in South-East Asia (Li 2009), the forested landscapes of Gudalur acted as a ‘safety-valve’ of sorts for peasants from other parts of south India. In the 1940s and 1950s, many people came to Gudalur, including Balakrishnan’s father, as a result of the state’s attempts to promote the growth of food crops through the ‘Grow More Food Campaign’. The Grow More Food Campaign, initiated by the British to counter the effects of the Bengal famine and sustain the war effort, continued in the immediate post-Independence period to help rebuild the economy after the Second World War (Krishnan 2009; Menon et al. 2013). Smallholders, mainly from what is today Kerala, were encouraged to come to Gudalur to cultivate food crops and develop the agricultural economy of independent India (Menon et al. 2013). Others came simply in search of land (Prabhakar 1994: 94-95). Despite the predominance of tea by this time, Gudalur comprised a number of valleys that were well suited for paddy cultivation.

The last major wave of migration into Gudalur was after the

Sirimavo-Sastri Pact in 1964, which resulted in the repatriation of over five lakh Indian Tamils from the plantations of erstwhile Ceylon to various parts of south India. In the mid-19th century, in a concomitant instance of colonial mobilisations, lakhs of Tamil labourers from various districts of the Madras Presidency crossed the Palk Bay mostly to work on tea plantations in Ceylon (Amrith 2015). A large number of these labourers had to return to India when they were denied citizenship in erstwhile Ceylon. Many, after troubled journeys, eventually came to Gudalur as the hilly climate and tea estates were familiar to them (Adams 1989: 324). More labourers came after the war broke out in Sri Lanka between the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 1983 (Sriramachandran 2010: 12–13). The Government of Tamil Nadu established the Tamil Nadu Tea Plantation Corporation (TANTEA) as early as 1968 and acquired non-janmam lands so as to provide work for many of these repatriates.¹⁰ The population of Gudalur increased from 66,057 in 1961 to 1,81,917 by 1991 (Census of India 1961, 1991).

The Gudalur Janmam Estates (Abolition and Conversion to Ryotwari) Act, 1969 — henceforth the Janmam Abolition Act — turned migratory pasts into sedentary presents. The Janmam Abolition Act was drafted as a means to abolish the janmam system of land tenure. While the Act was an effort at land reform, it also had markers of belonging that were the basis of recognising rights to land. The Act aimed to bestow *patta* (title) to jenmis and tenants under Sections 8 and 9 of the Act respectively. Under Section 10, encroachers on janmam land who had cultivated it for at least three years prior to the Act were also given title. However, the state did not grant title to estates that had leased land from jenmis (Section 17). Instead, it reserved the right to either extend leases or terminate them. Krishnan (2009) has detailed the efforts of large estate owners in particular to challenge the Act legally and of subsequent encroachment by estate workers and small farmers, partly at least due to the legal hiatus that ensued as a result of court cases. What is important to point out here, however, in the context of debates about rootedness and belonging is that estate workers whose families had migrated to Gudalur in the late 19th and early 20th centuries such as Saif's and who had encroached

upon Section 17 land after the introduction of the Janmam Abolition Act were not given patta. In other words, the state did not grant title based on how long people had been (or how rooted they were) in Gudalur, but rather based on the type of land they cultivated and the duration of that cultivation. Scattered across Gudalur today are a large number of small farmers who continue not to have title to their land because it is Section 17 land.

At different points of time, therefore, the state has used different markers of belonging to make and remake Gudalur. Historically, we have traced this back to the arrival of the Nilambur Kovilakam in the mid-19th century and the establishment of colonial plantation labour forces. Around the period of the Second World War, anyone willing to help rejuvenate agricultural production was welcomed to Gudalur. And finally, in the 1970s and 1980s Indian Tamils repatriated to India were settled in large numbers in Gudalur. These multivalent markers of belonging, we argue, established what could be called a politics of belonging. That is, a politics in which a now heterogenous mix of ethnic communities settled in Gudalur were made to stake claims to their belonging by means of their alignment with multivalent projects of statemaking. However, with the Janmam Abolition Act, belonging and rootedness began to overlap more, albeit at first in complex ways.

2. Naturalising and Nationalising: The Making of Gudalur's Conservation Landscapes

While the project of statemaking in Gudalur had a mobile history, nature in the course of statemaking was increasingly sedentarised. That is, particular spatial tropes were imagined as part of a wider forest conservation discourse. The imagining of Gudalur as a forested landscape and apprehensions of deforestation had its antecedents in the mid-19th century. The Nilambur Kovilakam expressed growing concerns about possible deforestation and dwindling wildlife. Although the Kovilakam leased much of Mudumalai to the forest department for timber extraction, it ensured that exacting stipulations were inserted into the earliest leases with other than forest department tenants, restricting both hunting and felling of trees. Moreover, while

usufruct rights were granted to lessees the Kovilakam retained rights to products such as ivory and timber (Krishnan 2009: 286). These lease contracts were, in that sense, the beginnings of forest conservation in its territorialised form. As Vandergeest and Peluso (1995) have argued, territorialisation is the process by which access to natural spaces and resources is delimited.

The colonial administration's forest department also became increasingly concerned about the state of forests, namely that timber harvesting was proceeding at an unsustainable rate. In 1927, the department acquired Mudumalai from the Kovilakam to declare it as a reserved forest. But rather than actually curtailing the extraction of timber itself, this move simply gave the forest department exclusive legal rights to timber so that it could ensure sustainable yields. In 1940, when the reserved forest was declared a sanctuary, timber felling was increasingly restricted and wildlife conservation prioritised. In 1958, the sanctuary was expanded to cover a total area of 318.7 sq. km and in 1977 it was declared as Mudumalai Wildlife Sanctuary and National Park.

The drawing of boundaries, be it in the form of reserved forests or wildlife sanctuaries and national parks, had the effect of restricting local land use practices. Creating 'natural' spaces had very specific meanings that were linked to processes of statemaking. Forests, trees and wildlife, though they were acted upon, were increasingly imagined outside of culture, reflecting the dichotomy between nature and culture that a number of scholars have argued is characteristic of Western thought and colonial forest policy (Descola 2013). This lineage of thinking drew directly from the national park system developed in the United States by naturalists such as John Muir. In this ideation, nature was imagined as a space outside of the motions of daily life, as a site of recreation, leisure or adventure. Not as a space to inhabit, but as a space of respite from the routine of work and normative society.¹¹

Although this meant that people now for the most part were imagined as being outside of nature, colonial subjectification too relied on tropes of the noble savage as part of nature. For example, Cederlof (2002), in the context of the upper plateau of the Nilgiris,

has argued that the colonial administration racialised the Toda as the ideal type of noble savage sedentarised as part of the shola grassland given their traditional occupation as a pastoral community who rely on the buffalo (now commonly known as the Toda Buffalo). In Gudalur, Adivasis were allowed to undertake shifting cultivation (*kumri*) in certain forest areas as long as they aided the forest department in creating 'natural' timber reserves (Gnanavelu 1989: 115). So although, in a sense, Adivasis were fundamentally dispossessed from their lands as the colonial state began naturalising and territorialising forested regions, there are also a number of instances of the selfsame colonial governments making allowances for Adivasi rights. In most cases, these allowances found their basis in racialising tropes or colonial moralities.

The increasing nature-culture divide (Sivaramakrishnan 1999: 14) that arose in the colonial imagination can perhaps be best exemplified with the example of colonial hunting in the mid-20th century (Pandian 1993). Debates took place within the colonial administration about moving the Mudumalai Wildlife Sanctuary and National Park to the Sigur area further east. The Nilgiri Game Association, an association primarily of British hunters, however, objected to this as Sigur was a prime hunting area. Hunting and conservation were not seen as antithetical in the sense that different spaces were reserved for each. In fact, members of the Nilgiri Game Association were honorary forest guards and helped the department in its protection duties.¹² This illustrates not only the nature-culture dichotomy but also that sedentarised conservation spaces were not 'natural' but the result of political and economic priorities and the leverage of political actors. Sedentarised nature went on to take other forms in Gudalur. The forest department staked claims over even privately owned lands. The promotion of the tea economy meant that large areas of Gudalur were by the mid-20th century dotted with tea plantations either in the form of smallholder agriculture or large estates. In 1949, the Madras state passed the Madras Preservation of Private Forests Act. The Act essentially provided the legal power to the forest department to regulate land use practices on private lands that were deemed to be forests.¹³ The state was, however, unsuccessful

in implementing the Act because it was unable to police all lands. The Madras Private Forests (Assumption of Management) Act, 1961, which gave the forest department the power to take over private forests and manage them, was passed as an attempt to rectify this situation. However, this too was not only resisted by estate owners but also challenged in court (Menon 2015: 42).

In 1969, the Tamil Nadu government passed the Janmam Abolition Act. Although it was purportedly an Act of agrarian reform, the Act was essentially aimed at reclaiming uncultivated portions of the original janmam leases as forests. Under the Act, Section 17 lands (leased lands) could be claimed by the forest department if leased estate areas were deemed to be 'undeveloped'. Forests could also be declared under Section 53 and brought under the control of the forest department. Consequently, although the stated purpose of this Act was to abolish janmam holdings and distribute land to cultivators or tenants, in practice it also became an instrument through which the state attempted to extend its territorial control over 'forested' landscapes. Forests within estates were to be retrieved as nature.

The irony truly is that until the forest department attempted to reclaim these lands, they remained relatively uncultivated. When the Janmam Abolition Act was first passed, cultivated portions of leases were distinguishable from uncultivated areas. In official language, cultivated areas were termed developed and uncultivated areas undeveloped. Planters had left large portions of their leases forested and it was these portions that the Act sought to reclassify as forests. However, after a period of legal hiatus in which planters challenged the constitutional validity of the state laying claim to Section 17 plantations (or at least the undeveloped parts of them) many of these undeveloped areas came under cultivation.

Planters, with the connivance of forest officials, were able to extend their cultivated area. They also permitted plantation workers to grab small parcels of land, thereby rendering plantations and forests as permeable categories unamenable to easy acquisition by the state (Krishnan 2009). It is arguably in this period that the most extensive deforestation — that is, if we think of cultivation and the

presence of forests as being mutually exclusive — has occurred. It is also this history that served as a benchmark for the state to question the conservation credentials of small farmer ‘encroachers’ to belong to Gudalur.

Hence, the enactment of the Janmam Abolition Act in 1974 resulted in many estate workers and small farmers either buying small patches of Section 17 land or encroaching upon such land. Other families across the Gudalur landscape had already done so prior to the Act. Many of these ‘encroachers’ had long family histories of working on large estates. Menon et al. (2013: 458) have argued that encroachment was partly a consequence of the Plantations Labour Act of 1951 that required estate owners to provide housing, medical, maternity and educational facilities to workers. Casual labour was effectively a cheaper option. Moreover, many farmers preferred cultivating their own land or working on smaller estates where they had more flexibility in terms of working hours.

Harking back to the same pristine pasts of abundant forests, Godavarman Thirumulpad, of the Nilambur Kovilakam family, filed a writ petition that led to the now popularly known Godavarman case.¹⁴ In it, he argued that the courts must immediately intervene to prevent further deforestation of the lands his ancestors had cared for. In 1996, the Supreme Court issued an interim order on this case which decidedly changed the categorical reach of ‘forests’ all across the country. The court instructed the Tamil Nadu government to prevent tree felling on forestlands (including janmam lands) and the conversion of forests to non-forest uses. Significantly, the court ordered that any land that conforms to the dictionary definition of forests may be treated as a forest for administrative purposes regardless of what conflict this may entail with preceding land use patterns. This not only gave the forest department potential control over all dictionary-defined forests but also brought these forests under the ambit of the Supreme Court. The highest court mandated evictions and began to police the micro-practices of farmers, including the size and species of trees that were permissible on their lands.¹⁵ A separate forest bench was established within the Supreme Court to hear similar

forest-related cases. This bench has since weighed in on the minutiae of everyday life in Gudalur. From the provision of basic amenities in O'Valley¹⁶ to the felling of trees in Mudumalai, the locus of power has been shifted to the Centre and the courts.¹⁷

From territorialised spaces set aside for conservation (with its multiple meanings) to restrictions on tree felling on private lands Gudalur has, as suggested at the outset, been increasingly envisaged as a conservation landscape. In 1986, UNESCO declared the Nilgiris as a Biosphere Reserve with a core area of 1,240 sq. km and a buffer area of 4,280 sq. km. The main aim of the Nilgiri Biosphere was to create awareness of the 'natural' heritage of the Nilgiris (Menon 2015: 34).

More recently, in addition to being territorialised, conservation has also acquired nationalised meanings with its focus on charismatic megafauna. In 2007, the government declared what was the Mudumalai Wildlife Sanctuary and National Park as a tiger reserve.¹⁸ It is no coincidence that tigers (and elephants too), emblematic of India's national identity, assume such importance in the project of conservation. Indeed, Mudumalai Tiger Reserve is part of a nationwide Project Tiger. NDTV and Aircel have, over the last few years, promoted their national campaign entitled Save Our Tigers.¹⁹ These projects then become sites wherein biopower of large 'national' mammals becomes the forte of a state whose legitimacy is derived not solely from its ability to control and manage its subjects but also its capacity to care. Cederlof and Sivaramakrishnan (2005) describe these as ecological nationalisms, in which the project of curating a national identity becomes enmeshed with the ecological well-being of its populations.

In summary, while the project of statemaking reared one of its many heads to create mobile histories, on the other hand it increasingly created a sedentarised nature. For much of colonial and post-colonial history, forest conservation (in different forms) sat alongside cultivation. Be it tea estate workers, farmers or repatriated Indian Tamils, they all belonged in Gudalur for different reasons. However, as these landscapes became increasingly territorialised by a conservation ethic, 'forests' have categorically come to acquire much

greater significance in the making of Gudalur. An already existing politics of belonging contained within it the content, potential and affordances (Massumi 1992) required to be modified subsequently by conservation governmentalities. That is, those who once belonged were either restricted through new forest legislation and/or deemed encroachers based on the type of land they cultivated and the nature of their property rights. In other words, these landscapes have been spatially delimited as 'natural'. This requires a belonging predicated on this kind of a conservation ethic.

In Gudalur, the seemingly universal ethic of conservation has travelled through multiple historical conjunctures. As Tsing (2005) has argued, to problematise universals by pointing out specificities that don't conform to them pays insufficient attention to something fundamental about how universals derive their legitimacy. In order to succeed, universals must compromise and collaborate, drawing multivalent projects and sets of relations into their singular and universalising fold. And so it is in Gudalur that the universals of conservation and environmentalism have accommodated hunting and timber enclosures, racialising tropes of the noble savage and ecological nationalisms.

What is perhaps common to all of these ideations of nature is that they belong. Both literally and metaphorically, nature is that which is rooted, both in the spread of dendritic root systems into soil structures and, to extend from this, in that it is bounded by space. Plants, animals, ecosystems and climate are defined in relation to how they are tied to a place (Ives 2014). Mirroring a sedentarist metaphysics, which gives rooted identities precedence over migrants, ecological species too are classified in terms of those that are endemic²⁰ as against those that are invasive. Our point here is not necessarily to problematise in situ conservation but simply to call our attention to the pervasive ways in which the sedentary is steeped in our metaphysics. Despite the many different rationales that operate through conservation, it is nevertheless premised on a universal of sedentarism that at given points of time are frozen as the authentic nature given particular priorities.

3. Positioning, Resistance and Environmental Subjectivities

Li (2000: 151) has used the idea of positioning to understand how indigenous communities in Indonesia responded to the New Order regime's models of development. She argued that people draw on their own practices and representations to engage and struggle with policy. Positioning can take place on a broad continuum from resistance to internalisation of discourses and the adoption of new subjectivities (Li 2000; Steur 2015). We show how people are using the imbrications present in laws to position themselves. In other words, people root themselves in multivalent and overlapping ways by demonstrating situatedness in multiple manner: claiming to have been in a place for a long time, illustrating their affective ties to nature and enmeshing their identities in the topography of hill landscapes. Gudalur's environmental history, at one level, is a history of resistance. People's everyday lives, depending no doubt on how much land they have, whether they own it or not and where they are situated in the landscape, involve actions that are deemed 'illegal'. Many farmers cultivate Section 17 land and hence in the eyes of the state are encroachers. Others stray into reserved forests or the Mudumalai Tiger Reserve to collect firewood, graze their cattle, collect non-timber forest produce and maybe even hunt animals despite the fact that they have no settled rights. Much of this resistance, it should be noted, is with the connivance of state officials. Chhatre and Saberwal (2006) highlighted similar actions by local people in the context of the Great Himalayan National Park.

It is equally important to see how the state's broader project of laying claim to land and questioning the 'classification' of land types has been resisted. Krishnan (2009) has detailed the more than 30-year legal history of the Janmam Abolition Act. Two dimensions of these legal challenges warrant attention. First, litigants (primarily estate lessees) questioned the state's right to usurp estate land given that Gudalur had been settled in 1886²¹ and resettled in 1926 (*ibid.*: 289). Settlement, they argued, meant that ryotwari tenure had been granted. Second, they challenged the state's laying claim to forests, saying that if the Act was an act of agrarian reform, laying claim to forests went against the stated intentions of the Act. Why these two

legal challenges in particular are of importance is because they speak about conservation, land ownership and the relationship between the two. The state, through the Janmam Abolition Act, was making a case that it could best decide what forests were and conserve them. Any lands that had trees or were undeveloped under the Act were forests. As illustrated earlier, the state linked belonging to a mix of property rights configurations, land use and conservation imperatives. The legal challenges to the Act can be seen as a questioning of both the logics of conservation as well as belonging.

While the courts, for the most part, upheld the Janmam Abolition Act resulting in a spate of evictions of farmers who had encroached upon large estate lands (Krishnan 2009), farmers continued to challenge the state's logic of belonging that underlay the eviction drive. With the help of a local agricultural workers' union, many who cultivated Section 17 land claimed that they had been in Gudalur for a long period of time. In one case, over one hundred families in the Devala area, mostly Indian Tamils repatriated from Sri Lanka, filed a petition in the Munsif Court in 1986, arguing that they were entitled to title deeds to their land under a Ministry of Environment Circular No. 13-1/90-FP that directed that all pre-1980 encroachments of forestlands be regularised. The Madras High Court finally ruled that the litigants may be given title to their lands. However, the litigants have not received title deeds till date due in large part to the unwillingness of the district administration, especially the forest department, to grant them these deeds given that they are Section 17 lands, and hence they remain on appeal in the High Court.

The other route taken by Gudalur residents to claim property rights, given the state's increasing resoluteness in sticking to the letter of the law, has been to highlight that they are legitimate claimants given the state's own markers of belonging. In a Deleuzian (Biehl and Locke 2010) sense of becoming, they present themselves as *becoming* sedentary and in doing so, remake the boundaries that divide who is rooted and who is not (Dave 2014). Earlier, we had argued that state policies had certain markers of rootedness. These included contractual relationships to land, duration of stay and most recently a conservation ethos. A number of small farmers we have spoken to argue that the

Nilambur Kovilakam gave them tenancy rights to land which would allow them to claim title under Section 9 (rights for tenants) of the Janmam Abolition Act. Anbazhagan, whose father came to Gudalur from Salem to work as a labourer on the Rousandanmalai estate, now occupies three acres of land to which he does not have title. He has records that prove that his father bought the land he currently cultivates from the Kovilakam and argues that he should have been given patta under Section 9 of the Janmam Abolition Act. Anbazhagan makes the case that his land has been wrongly classified as Section 17.

The growing emphasis on Gudalur as a conservation landscape has made it more and more difficult for Anbazhagan and others like him to get patta. The only real avenue of opportunity that exists is through the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Rights to Forest) Act, 2006 — henceforth the Forest Rights Act. This Act aims to bestow individuals and communities rights to forests that they have historically used. Who is entitled to such rights, however, has been a bone of contention both during the drafting of the legislation and after its enactment. This has been the case not only because of ontological differences with regard to who is a genuine forest dweller but also because rights are linked to conservation and hence in deciding who will promote conservation and who will not. The preamble of the Act states that rights ‘include the responsibilities and authority for sustainable use, conservation of biodiversity and maintenance of ecological balance’. The Act grants rights to Scheduled Tribes²² if they had occupied forestland prior to 13 December 2015. On the other hand, other traditional forest dwellers, who were also entitled to rights, were defined as those who had resided in forestlands for three generations prior to that same date and depended on forests for bona fide livelihood needs. Implicit in this distinction was that Scheduled Tribes a priori could be deemed to depend on forests for livelihood needs whereas non-Scheduled Tribes had to establish their bona fide dependence by also residing in forest areas for at least three generations (one generation in the Act was the equivalent of 25 years). This raises questions about what one means by dependence. The three generation requirement, in other words, became yet one more condition for belonging.

As Karthik and Menon (2016) have illustrated, the state, in implementing the Act in Gudalur, started with the premise that only Scheduled Tribes fulfilled the residential requirements. Working alongside an Adivasi organisation and supportive non-governmental organisations (NGOs), it sanctioned the establishment of gram sabhas that were exclusively Adivasi though by the letter of the law this was illegal (unless villages were exclusively Adivasi) (Karthik and Menon 2016: 45). This has resulted indirectly in a discursive polarisation of sorts, which Li (2000) also details in the context of Sulawesi, Indonesia, namely between the indigenous (read Adivasi) and non-indigenous (read non-Adivasi).

In Gudalur, as Taghioff and Menon (2010) have argued, there has been much political contestation around the formation of the Mudumalai Tiger Reserve and the implementation of the Forest Rights Act. Central to these contestations are who belongs, who should be entitled to claims under the Forest Rights Act and what constitute forests to which rights can be claimed. Though both the Forest Rights Act and the Wildlife Protection Amendment Act, 2006, have specific sections that deal with settling rights, contestations are as much about the normative principles that underlie these laws as they are about the letter of the law. Until recently, the Forest Rights Act was stuck in the courts due to a constitutional challenge mounted by retired forest officials who argued that the implementation of the law would fundamentally contravene Article 51(a), which enlists conservation as a constitutional duty.

Elsewhere we have written in more detail about the complex politics around forest rights in Gudalur (Karthik and Menon 2016); here we are more concerned with how identities and rights claims are increasingly legitimised through claiming conservationist credentials. As mentioned earlier, the state with the support of NGOs assumed that only Adivasis had legitimate claims to forests rights in Gudalur. This belief, though partly based on the contention that non-Adivasis had not been in Gudalur for three generations, and if they had had already been bestowed title to their land, was also premised on the idea that Adivasis were the only 'genuine' forest dwellers. Though Adivasis too legally have to be relocated from the Mudumalai Tiger Reserve, the

forest department has entertained the possibility of allowing them to stay on inside Mudumalai. Moreover, eco-development programmes aimed at providing alternative livelihoods to forest dwellers located in the buffer areas of Mudumalai have only targeted Adivasi hamlets such as Chempakolli, located just outside of Mudumalai, and Anaikatti in the Masinagudi area. This again is the case because Adivasis are considered to be rooted in forests.

Programmes such as eco-development are new forms of governmentality aimed at creating environmental subjects conducive to seeing through the state's conservation project. By focusing on Adivasi communities alone, the state seeks to partly build on the affective ties Adivasis have with forests. This is central to a discourse that sees Adivasis as distinct from non-Adivasis and as victims of dispossession by non-Adivasis, something that is no doubt partly true. In Gudalur, there are NGOs that work only with Adivasis and highlight Adivasis' closeness to nature and wildlife. It is this discourse that the state is increasingly building on. It remains to be seen what happens when the Forest Rights Act is finally operationalised in Gudalur. Will Adivasis be bestowed rights, for example, on Section 17 land or will the state lay claim to such lands?

Non-Adivasis, who feel their rights to forest land are being denied by the state, have made the case that they too are rooted in Gudalur. As Karthik and Menon (2016: 48) have argued, repatriates speak about their upcountry past in Sri Lanka where they worked in tea estates similar to those of Gudalur, 'suggesting a certain enmeshing of topography with identity'. The agricultural labour organisation we mentioned earlier has stressed the class dimension of land alienation as a way to emphasise that many non-Adivasis (repatriates, Malayalis etc.) have similar histories of marginalisation vis-à-vis conservation policy as do Adivasis. Non-Adivasis in the Masinagudi area, as Krithivasan (2011) argued, have invoked their *padivasi*, or half-Adivasi, status to make an argument for being included in eco-development initiatives. Other Gudalur inhabitants make reference to the woodedness of their small estates to counter the argument that they are environmentally unfriendly.

These counter-narratives of sorts are important as they raise questions about conservation — its means, motives and implications. Taking as a premise the foundational ethic of conservation, what we are calling into question are some of its more pernicious effects. While the premise of conservation in and of itself is considered laudable by some, it is also problematised by others as being both ahistorical and apolitical. That is, the ethic of conservation taken on its own does not adequately account for the many different and contradictory projects that have historically found refuge within it (Forsyth and Walker 2008). That aside, what is in question here is its consequence, i.e. the need to territorialise nature in ways that create further environmental subjectivities. This is predicated to a large extent upon a constructed binary between conservation and livelihoods, not only by designating fixed spaces as inviolate but also by significantly regulating the use of private lands and distinguishing between livelihood and conservation prerogatives within them.

4. ‘Simplifying’ Social Reality and Conservation?

It appears that Gudalur is increasingly being envisaged as a larger conservation landscape and wildlife corridor. This landscape already includes an ‘inviolate’ tiger reserve, which might well legally become part of an inviolate complex of tiger reserves that extend from Wayanad to Sathyamangalam. Wildlife experts and enthusiasts make the case that only about 5 per cent of India is set aside for protected areas and that the social costs are minimal given the importance of protecting species such as the tiger and elephant, amongst others (Karanth 2003). Similarly, conservationists argue that the watchful eye of the Supreme Court, even if it imposes hardship on small farmers, is necessary, otherwise forests and other lands will be further degraded. The state is both part of this logic and has bought into it as well. In the process, it has also made a case for engaging with Adivasis and including them in conservation initiatives, albeit in limited ways.

This vision of a conservation landscape has certain social and ecological consequences that require more deliberation. Gudalur is now home to seven lakh people, many of whom travelled here as

part of processes of statemaking. Like Saif and Balakrishnan, they consider Gudalur their home. Many of them, however, do not have titles to their land and are not considered by the state, at least now in the charged political climate of Gudalur, to belong. Belonging, in the state's view, once linked to the type of property rights one had, is increasingly linked to rootedness and environmental subjectivities also. This begs the question as to what should be done with all those who do not have title and are deemed to be encroachers. If they are not rooted in Gudalur, where can they be rooted?

It is worth looking at the history of relocation in Gudalur. The Moundaden Chetty community, who have lived and cultivated paddy in Mudumalai for hundreds of years, have been fighting in court to be relocated because of the lack of development within Mudumalai (Desai and Bhargav 2010). While migrant communities in the buffer areas emphasise their rootedness in place and oppose the declaration of a Tiger Reserve, the Chetties want nothing more than to be moved out. Chetties within the reserve have struggled to cultivate paddy, bananas and ginger in the low-lying *vayals* (wetlands) because of the threat of elephants. They have been denied roads, electricity, pattas and any other basic developmental facilities. In 2002, the Chetties filed a case in the Madras High Court seeking relocation. In 2007, the High Court ruled that they must be relocated according to the National Tiger Conservation Authority guidelines. However, ten years later, the relocation process is still ongoing.

Earlier we had said that the forest department had considered allowing Adivasi groups to stay in Mudumalai given their rootedness. However, thinking of Adivasis as a homogenous and unified group is potentially problematic not only because it occludes individual agency but also because different Adivasi communities are embedded within different sets of social relations. Betta Kurumbas, who live on the borders of the core zone, are largely employed as anti-poaching watchers and trackers by the forest department. Paniyans have historically (and till date) worked as agricultural labourers in the fields of Chetties and also trade in medicinal plants. Kattunayakans are today perhaps the most economically destitute group and are, to some extent, dependent on minor forest produce such as honey for

seasonal income. While politically it is understandable to talk about Adivasis as a whole in terms of their collective marginalisation, in practice each Adivasi group might have different opinions about their affective ties to forests and material dependence on them. Further, taking the position that Adivasis should decide for themselves pays insufficient attention to the role of intermediaries (Latour 2005) who intercede in, for example, relocation processes. Adivasi organisations weighed in against relocation to Aiyankolly.

On the ecological side, there are also a number of complex concerns. Literature in the field of conservation has widely critiqued single-species-oriented approaches to conservation. Landscape conservationists, for example, argue that it is more important to think in terms of a landscape approach and the capacity for multiple species to exist together within complex connections of ecosystems, than in terms of, for example, the conservation of large mammals alone (da Fonseca et al. 2005). This is not to say that tigers and elephants should not be protected but rather to suggest the need for a wider conversation about what ecologically valuable landscapes are and what they are not. For example, is Mudumalai important as a tiger reserve alone or because it is part of a large contiguous area of forests that has ecological value or both? If both, then surely it is necessary to also problematise human-nature relations more critically in terms of affective ties to nature?

In this context, as social scientists, how do we make sense of wooded estates that dot the Gudalur landscape? In 2008-09, the first author was part of a research team that undertook a survey in Bharathi Nagar, O'Valley, a region in the southeast of Gudalur that is comprised of only Section 17 land, the land that the state considers forestland (Menon et al. 2013: 459). Ninety-three households were interviewed out of a total of 437, most of whom were small farmer households. These farmers had 27 different types of trees on their land, the most common being jack, mango, arecanut and silver oak. But they also had what they called 'forest' trees such as venteak (*Lagestroemia lanceolata*), vattakanni (both *Kydia calycina* and *Clerodendrum viscosum*), rosewood (*Dalbergia latifolia*) and senthuram (*Buteao*

monosperma). Importantly, the farmers mentioned that they would grow more forest trees but were afraid that the forest department would lay claim to them. While growing trees on private lands appears to be in line with the aims of the Tamil Nadu Biodiversity Conservation and Greening Project which is implemented in the Nilgiris, in Section 17 areas this scheme does not exist.²³

There is also the troubling question of wildlife beyond borders. Rangarajan et al. (2014) have argued that ‘large taxa cannot be easily contained within frontiers of parks and sanctuaries’ (ibid: 10). This is the case in Gudalur where farmers throughout the landscape, not only within parks or along corridors, spot elephants on a fairly regular basis. Recently, a number of cases of human-wildlife conflict have resulted in people — mostly labourers, migrants and refugees — meeting their death at the hands of tigers and elephants. In 2015 alone there were about five cases²⁴ and in 2016 the number has escalated to about eight (as of June 2016) and counting. In March 2016, there was a disturbing spate in which three people were killed by three different animals over the course of just three days. What these episodes indicate is that regardless of the pros and cons of inviolate protected areas, attention needs to be given to human-wildlife conflict outside such areas. Two options are there: either to extend the state’s control over land by expanding the bounds of protected areas or to have a more mobile imagination with regard to wildlife management. The former seems to be the preferred one of the state. And more recently, corporate India seems to have bought into it as conservation is increasingly neoliberalised through corporate-sponsored campaigns such as Save Our Tigers, jointly financed by NDTV and Aircel. Such approaches raise vexing questions about people’s livelihoods in such wildlife-demarcated zones.

5. Conclusion

Saif and Balakrishnan have similar travelled pasts but, in the watchful eyes of the state Saif, who cultivates Section 17 land, is an encroacher and Balakrishnan, who cultivates patta land, a legitimate property holder. In other words, while both might contend that they belong

in the forested landscape of Gudalur, from a legal standpoint only Balakrishnan does. What does this tell us about Malkki's sedentarist metaphysics? Malkki argued that the need to be rooted, itself a sign of belonging, was because territorialised identities had been naturalised. What we have illustrated is that 'being rooted' at one level is ultimately sanctioned or not by the state, that there is a distinction between belongingness and rootedness, and that in the state's conservationist imagination people need to be rooted to belong because those who are rooted are more likely to prioritise conservation.

We tried to understand this complicated relationship between belonging and rootedness in Gudalur through the lens of statemaking. Both the Nilambur Kovilakam jenmi and the colonial and post-colonial states encouraged in-migration to the region to promote both the estate and foodgrain economy. The post-colonial state also repatriated lakhs of disenfranchised Indian Tamils from Ceylon, many of whom have settled in the familiar terrain of Gudalur. From the state's point of view, they all belonged because they helped fulfil particular priorities of statemaking.

We illustrated that with greater prioritisation of conservation from around the mid-20th century, the politics of belonging and rootedness took a turn. The state sought to take control of private plantations by deeming them private forests. It sought to lay claim to undeveloped forestlands through the Janmam Abolition Act. And finally, with the backing of the Supreme Court, it was allowed to take control of all dictionary-defined forests. Through these various legal measures, the state decided who legally belonged in Gudalur and who did not.

The politics of belonging and rootedness have been and continue to be contested. Statemaking, we may recall, is about the troubled co-production of state and society. State policies and laws were challenged through encroachments and legal battles, for example, against the Janmam Abolition Act. More recently, the Forest Rights Act, a product of a long struggle, gave forest dwellers legal sanction to claim land they had used historically. The Act has opened up debates about who is entitled to claim rights. Distinctions exist within the

law with regard to Scheduled Tribes and other forest dwellers, and debates have taken place about how long people have actually been in Gudalur and what type of land they cultivate. We have argued that the state has increasingly distinguished between Scheduled Tribes and non-Scheduled Tribes and made a case that only the former are entitled to forest rights. Furthermore, in its attempts to create inviolate zones, the state has only included Scheduled Tribes as part of eco-development programmes aimed at promoting alternative livelihoods.

Finally, by detailing the history of statemaking we have argued that conservation has been increasingly sedentarised both ecologically and socially. Gudalur is now imagined as a conservation landscape that needs to be retrieved. Only Scheduled Tribes can play some role in this retrieval. What this means is unclear for the lakhs of migrants who live there. Removing them will be politically impossible but continuing to label them as encroachers will make their lives difficult. It also in a sense erases their own ‘conservation’ practices such as tree farming and the possibility of imagining Gudalur as a more ecologically and social diverse mosaic.

Acknowledgement

The ideas developed in this paper are the result of long periods of fieldwork undertaken by us both individually and collectively over the last couple of years. They are also the product of many discussions we have had with people in Gudalur and elsewhere and much reflection aimed at furthering a conversation around ‘nature’ conservation that is less socially exclusive. We would like to thank everyone who has shared time. An earlier draft of this paper was commented upon by Jayshree Vencatesan — our thanks to her. Thanks are also due to the anonymous referee for insightful comments that we hope have strengthened the paper.

Notes

- 1 Pseudonyms are used for people’s names but actual place names are used.
- 2 When we speak about Gudalur, we are referring to the region of Gudalur that comprises Gudalur and Pandalur taluks.
- 3 *Kangani* was an intermediary recruiter of labour who would contract with labourers from his or neighbouring villages as well as supervise and discipline them.

- 4 We borrow from Sivaramakrishnan (1999: 5) in defining statemaking as the process by which the state and society are mutually constituted. It is equally about the 'ideological and organizational power of the central government to penetrate society, exact compliance, and invoke commitment'.
- 5 We use the term Indian Tamils to both illustrate how they were known in erstwhile Ceylon (present-day Sri Lanka) and how they identify themselves today in the context of often being treated as outsiders. In India, and in Gudalur, they are often termed Ceylon Tamils or repatriates.
- 6 In Malayalam, *jenmi* (also spelt *janmi*) implies birth or birthright and hence hereditary. The Malabar Tenancy Act of 1930 defines a *jenmi* as 'a person entitled to the absolute proprietorship of land' (section 3 of the Act).
- 7 Kovilakam, also spelt as kovilagam by some scholars, denotes the principle palace/estate of princely lineages of Kerala.
- 8 The distinction between indigenous and autochthonous is important here. Scheduled Tribe communities, also often referred to as indigenous, were designated as such during the colonial period based on a number of social criteria linked to their putative 'backwardness'. In other words, the use of the term indigenous has a genealogy that can be traced back to paternalistic categorisations of people deemed to be inferior culturally. Autochthonous does not draw from this genealogy.
- 9 Estimates of long-distance migration of Indian workers between 1846 and 1932 range from 10 to 45 million (Bremen 1996:14) as cited in Li (2010: 71).
- 10 While many repatriates were absorbed within TANTEA estates, many others were not and hence worked on private estates.
- 11 Letter No. 235, 26th January 1945, from the General Secretary, Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal.
- 12 Tamil Nadu Archives, Chennai. Proceedings of the Chief Conservator of Forests, G.O. Miscellaneous 234/61 dated 30 September, 1961.
- 13 According to the Act, all estate lands as defined in the Madras Estates Lands Act, 1908, and other private forests of two or more hectares were subject to this law. Forests could include any land notified as such in the District Gazette. The law restricted the cutting of trees (Section 3-2) and the sale of land (Section 3-1).
- 14 *T. N. Godavarman Thirumulpad vs. Union of India & Others* Writ Petition (Civil) 202/1995 Order (dated 12 December, 1996).
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Central Empowered Committee (Constituted by the Honourable Supreme Court of India in Writ Petition (Civil) No. 202/95 & 171/96).
- 17 *T. N. Godavarman Thirumulpad vs. Union of India & Others* Writ Petition (Civil) 202/1995 Order dated 12 December, 1996).

- 18 G.O. Ms. 145 dated 28 December, 2007, declaring Mudumalai as a critical tiger reserve as per Section 38(v) of the Wildlife Protection Amendment Act, 2006. Importantly, Section 38(v) allowed for the creation of an ‘inviolate’ core zone. In the case of Mudumalai, the government declared the whole 321 sq. km as the core zone.
- 19 www.tiger.ndtv.com
- 20 Endemism is the condition of being limited to a particular space, i.e. not occurring outside of a particular habitat. As an ecological category endemism is co-constituted in close parallel with the notional ‘native species’. Native species are those that are ecologically native to a particular habitat. While there is much that can be unpacked from an examination of these categories (Fortwangler 2013), it suffices here to note that endemics and natives together form a compelling example of a sedentary metaphysic.
- 21 It is not clear if all of Gudalur was settled in 1886 itself, but the process of settlement started in 1886.
- 22 It is important to distinguish between Scheduled Tribes and Adivasis. Scheduled Tribes are an official designation given to various groups of historically disadvantaged indigenous people of India. Not all Adivasis, a term that also refers to indigenous people, necessarily were classified as Scheduled Tribes.
- 23 See www.forests.tn.nic.in/graphics/TBGP%20project%20010102011.pdf.
- 24 Palaniappan, V.S. ‘Elephant Attacks Continue to Claim Lives’, *The Hindu*, Coimbatore, 3 October, 2015.

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