

## Genealogies and Politics of Belonging: People, Nature and Conservation in the Nilgiri Hills of Tamil Nadu

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### Abstract

The landscape of Gudalur, located in the Nilgiri Hills of Tamil Nadu, India, has been shaped and re-shaped by multiple waves of in-migration that date back to the mid-nineteenth 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, now Sri Lanka. This article focuses on how the politics of belonging in Gudalur is a consequence of this history and has resulted in a sedentarist metaphysics shaping state policy and contestations around conservation. The article highlights how the state increasingly sees *adivasis* (=indigenous people) as a possible ethno-environmental fix for conservation and how non-*adivasis* project their environmental subjectivities to claim that they too belong. By unpacking the politics of belonging through a historical account of the making of conservation in the region, the article attempts to illustrate how conservation includes and excludes people from the hill landscape.

**Keywords:** sedentarist metaphysics, politics, conservation, identity, environmental subjectivities

### INTRODUCTION

Saif's<sup>1</sup> grandfather came to Aratuparai, a small hamlet in O'Valley, Gudalur (Figure 1),<sup>2</sup> from present-day Kerala in 1912 when a *kangani*<sup>3</sup> 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 (the mid-1940s to the 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.

There are many Saifs in Gudalur. While their families have travelled pasts, they are resolute in saying that they belong to

Gudalur. Their emphasis on belonging is aimed at establishing their bona fide presence in the region at a time when the government is trying to solve the vexing question of who (humans) and what belongs (non-humans) in Gudalur given the complex history of land-ownership and land-use in the region. While Gudalur is home to a large number of *adivasis*, small tea growers like Saif and large estates, it is also considered an ecologically sensitive area (ESA), not least because it is home to Mudumalai Tiger Reserve and a number of elephant corridors. Questions of belonging, in other words, assume importance in a context where wildlife and forest conservation are often seen to be pitted against people's entitlements to land and forests.

We argue that the question of who belongs in conservation landscapes is increasingly imagined in policy discourse along two parameters: (1) rootedness in place; and (2) conservation ethics. Conservationists (including the forest department) have a vision of retrieving/saving the 'natural' forested landscape of Gudalur. Such a vision increasingly, albeit reluctantly, sees *adivasis* as rooted both in place and in forests but questions the claims of others who reside in the landscape. Our interest in this article is twofold: (1) to understand how the region's

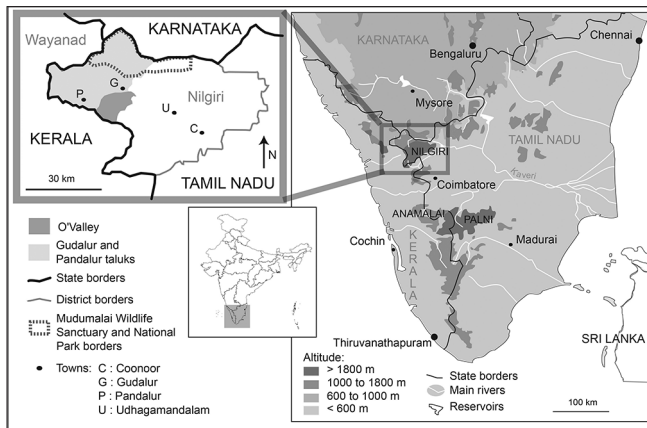
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**Figure 1**  
**Situating the Study Area**

complex history of migration and state-making has led to contested questions of belonging; and (2) to unpack the politics of belonging around conservation. We borrow from Malkki (1992) to highlight how the sedentarist metaphysics firmly shapes both questions of belonging and conservation in Gudalur today and illustrate how this metaphysics translates into what Anthias and Radcliffe (2015) call an ethno-environmental fix.

The article is divided into four main sections, following this introduction. In Section 2, we briefly narrate the history of in-migration to Gudalur over the past 150 years. The importance of doing so is to capture the diversity of people who made their way to this hill area, the reasons why they came, and how state policy facilitated the migration. Section 3 details the making of a conservation landscape in Gudalur and how meanings ascribed to conservation have changed over time. It also focuses on how conservation has increasingly moved towards the idea of retrieving/saving pristine nature including wildlife and the nationalist overtones of such conservation. Section 4 focuses on the politics of belonging and the sedentarist metaphysics around state-driven conservation policy with emphasis on how different social actors, adivasis and non-adivasis, position themselves vis-à-vis policy and emphasise their conservationist credentials. In Section 5, we detail how the recent Madhav Gadgil and Kasturirangan Reports have brought to the forefront different visions of what conservation landscapes should look like socially and ecologically. We end with a conclusion that summarises our argument and raises important questions about conservation in the future.

### MIGRATORY PASTS

While conservationists and NGOs both allude to a more pristine forest past where adivasis alone resided amongst the forests, the past two centuries, at least, have been witness to both, large-scale migration to the region and significant forest transformations. 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 nineteenth 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 then Madras Presidency. What distinguished British rule in many parts of Gudalur was that it was indirect: *jenmis* (=landlords) owned vast swathes of land and the British only claimed taxes on cultivated produce.<sup>4</sup> In 1845, the Nilambur Kovilakam, a *jenmi* who would eventually own almost 40,000 ha in the region, leased land to J.H. Ouchterlony. Close to 50% of current Gudalur was under the control of *jenmis* in the nineteenth century, most significantly with the Nilambur Kovilakam.<sup>5</sup> *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 the lands that had been escheated by the British (Krishnan 2009: 295).

Of importance to us in understanding the genealogy of belonging in Gudalur is that this phase of statemaking resulted in large numbers of people coming to Gudalur to work mostly on these British estates (*janmam* lands). The colonial state set about mobilising large forces of peasant labour from across the territories of the then Madras Presidency, most notably the Tamil and Malayalam speaking districts 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 (Breman 1996). Needless to say, this meant poor working conditions with many workers being indentured (Ravi Raman 1991: 247). Labour contractors, known as *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 twentieth century.<sup>6</sup> Although many of the labourers stayed on these lands only for a few months every year because of the short duration of their contracts or 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. As in the case of forest frontiers in South-east Asia

(Li 2000), the forested landscapes of Gudalur acted as a 'safety-valve' of sorts for peasants from other parts of south India. In the 1940s and the 1950s, many people came to Gudalur, mostly from other parts of the then Madras Presidency, 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 Indian economy after the Second World War (Amrith 2008; Krishnan 2009; Menon et al. 2013). While some peasants were encouraged to come, a few others came simply in search of land (Prabhakar 1994: 94-95). Despite the predominance of tea from the late nineteenth century, 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, a pact that resulted in the repatriation of over five lac 'Indian' Tamils from the plantations of erstwhile Ceylon to various parts of south India. In the mid-nineteenth century, lacs of Tamil labourers from various districts of the then Madras Presidency crossed the Palk Bay, mostly to work on tea plantations in Ceylon (Amrith 2013). A large number of these labourers had to return to India when they were denied citizenship due to the increasing Sinhalisation of the Sri Lankan state (Krishna 1999). 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 some of these repatriates.<sup>7</sup> Many others worked on private estates. The population of Gudalur increased from 66,057 in 1961 to 1,81,917 by 1991 (Census of India 1961, 1991). The current population is 2,31,073 (Census 2011).

Gudalur thus became home for a number of people who, for the most part, were seeking better futures. This of course meant that from a relatively scarcely populated region it became much more densely populated. It also meant that the landscape was increasingly dotted with tea estates. Not all who cultivated tea had title to their land. As Krishnan (2009) has highlighted in detail, the Gudalur Janmam Estates (Abolition and Conversion to Ryotwari) Act, 1969, (henceforth the Janam Abolition Act), an act meant to abolish the janmam system of land tenure and be an effort at land reform, in fact created the conditions for land grabbing. While the Act allowed jenmis to claim title to their land under Section 8 and tenants under Section 9, land that was leased by jenmis for tea cultivation was classified as Section 17. This land could not be regularised: either leases were to be extended or the government could reclaim the land. Large estates challenged the non-issuing of title to Section 17 lands in Court, creating a fluid legal situation which enabled estate workers and others to encroach upon land (Ibid 2009). 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. As we expand upon later, this is important in a context where who belongs and who does not is increasingly contested.

### **NATURALISING AND NATIONALISING: THE MAKING OF GUDALUR'S CONSERVATION LANDSCAPES**

Gudalur's mobile history resulted in more pressure on the region's forest resources and an increasing concern for forest conservation. The imagining of Gudalur as a forested landscape and apprehensions of deforestation had its antecedents in the mid-nineteenth century. The Nilambur Kovilakam expressed 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 one 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 the forests and 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 (Menon 2015).

Conservation assumed other dimensions as well. The Forest Department staked claims to private estates from the late-1940s onwards under the Madras Preservation of Private Forests Act, 1949, because these estates were heavily planted with trees. 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.<sup>8</sup> 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).

The drawing of boundaries, be it in the form of reserved forests, wildlife sanctuaries and national parks or claims on trees on private lands had the effect of restricting local land



use practices. Forests, trees and wildlife 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 (Rangarajan 1996; Sivaramakrishnan 1999; Descola 2013). This lineage of thinking drew directly from the national park system developed in the United States by naturalists such as John Muir. Nature was imagined as a space outside of the motions of daily life. It was, in other words, not a space to inhabit but a space of respite from the routine of work.<sup>9</sup>

In 1969, as mentioned earlier, the Tamil Nadu government passed the Janmam Abolition Act. Although it was purportedly an Act of agrarian reform, the Act was essentially used to reclaim 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 (Menon et al. 2013).

The irony 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 (Krishnan 2009).

Planters, with the connivance of the Forest Department officials, were able to extend their cultivated area. Plantation workers were also able to grab small parcels of land (Ibid 2009). It is arguably in this period that the most extensive deforestation has occurred. Many of these 'encroachers' had long family histories of working on large estates. Menon et al. (2013: 458) have argued that encroachment was also 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.

The next major event that shaped the politics around conservation in Gudalur was the famous Godavarman case.<sup>10</sup> Harking back to the same pristine past of abundant forests, Godavarman Thirumulpad, of the Nilambur Kovilakkam family, filed a writ petition in 1995 in which 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 forest lands (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 (Menon 2015). The highest court of the land mandated evictions and began to police the micro-practices of farmers, including the size and the species of trees that were permissible on their lands.<sup>11</sup> 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'Valley<sup>12</sup> to the felling of trees in Mudumalai, the locus of power has been shifted to the Government of India and the courts.<sup>13</sup>

The Godavarman judgment must be seen in the context of Gudalur increasingly becoming a conservation landscape. Ten years prior to the judgment, 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 mega-fauna. In 2007, the government declared what was the Mudumalai Wildlife Sanctuary and National Park as a tiger reserve.<sup>14</sup> 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, Save Our Tigers.<sup>15</sup> Cederlof and Sivaramakrishnan (2005) describe such actions of nation-states laying claim to charismatic animals such as tigers as ecological nationalisms, in which, the project of curating a national identity becomes enmeshed with the ecological well-being of its populations (human and non-human).

Conservation, in other words, has increasingly become about preserving 'pristine' nature. This was not always the case. Colonial imaginations of conservation had, previously, in the late-nineteenth and the early-twentieth centuries, been about ensuring sustainable timber harvests. In the 1940s and the 1950s, conservation was mediated by other priorities, for example, providing spaces for colonial officers to go hunting (Pandian 1993). By the 1970s, conservation, however, became more about preserving or reclaiming the 'natural' forests and wildlife of the Western Ghats. In the next two sections, we explore the implications of this 'new' form of conservation and what its social implications were in terms of a politics of belonging predicated on who lived symbiotically with nature

and who did not. As Trudeau (2006: 421) puts it, landscapes become social prescriptions that get naturalised.

### POSITIONING, RESISTANCE AND ENVIRONMENTAL SUBJECTIVITIES

The growing emphasis on making Gudalur a pristine conservation landscape once again has made it increasingly difficult for Saif and others like him to get *patta*(=title) and consequently access developmental facilities, government schemes, loans and agricultural subsidies. One 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 the forests that they have historically used to sustain themselves. While the Act grants rights to Scheduled Tribes<sup>16</sup> if they had occupied forest land prior to December 13, 2015, other traditional forest dwellers can only be granted rights if they have resided on forest lands for three generations (75 years) prior to that same date and depended on forests for bona fide livelihood needs.

In Gudalur, politics of belonging has played itself out around the Forest Rights Act. As Karthik and Menon (2016) have illustrated, the state, in initiating the implementation of the Act in Gudalur, started with the premise that only Scheduled Tribes fulfilled the residential requirements. If non-Scheduled Tribes, it was argued, had resided in the area for more than 75 years, they had already been given title to their lands. This vitiated the process of recognising rights as laid out in the Forest Rights Act. The state, working alongside an adivasi organisation and supportive non-governmental organisations (NGOs), sanctioned the establishment of *gram sabhas*(=village councils or village townhalls) that were exclusively adivasi, though by the letter of the law this was only legal if villages were exclusively adivasi (Karthik and Menon 2016: 45). This has resulted in a discursive adivasi and non-adivasi divide amongst many conservationists and NGOs in the region.

This discursive divide is based on two premises: 1) a sedentarist metaphysics that privileges people that are rooted in particular geographies for long periods of time; and 2) an ethno-environmental fix that sees adivasis as living symbiotically with nature. Malkki (1992) has detailed how the politics of belonging is often rooted (pun intended) in the belief that people who are born in a particular place are deemed to be more worthy of entitlements than those who are newer to a place. Similarly, 'ethnic' communities who are more rooted in nature are also more deserving of rights to that nature than those who are not as rooted (Anthias and Radcliffe 2015).

Li (2000), borrowing from Hall, makes a case for how belonging is an act of positioning. The state, or at least the Forest Department, along with some adivasi groups and NGOs have positioned adivasis as the original inhabitants of Gudalur. Their claim to forest land, and their rejection of the authenticity of claims by more recent migrant communities, is based on the contention that adivasis are 'traditional' forest dwellers and that their alienation from forests is very much tied up to the

growth of estates and the in-migration of other communities (Rycroft and Dasgupta 2011). In the case of Gudalur, it is not uncommon for conservationists (in their many guises) to speak, for example, of farmers from Kerala or even Sri Lankan repatriates as encroachers. These claims are often based on the fact that many of these households cultivate Section 17 land, for which, getting title has been very difficult.

What Anthias and Radcliffe (2015) term ethno-environmental fixes are also central to the politics of belonging around conservation.<sup>17</sup> It is not only the temporal (i.e., time), which provides rootedness to conservation landscapes like Gudalur, but also livelihoods in relation to nature. In Gudalur, there are NGOs that work only with adivasis and highlight adivasis' closeness to nature and wildlife. For example, Kattunayakans collect honey from forests and are, therefore, positioned as closer to nature. It is this discourse that the state is increasingly building on. Hence, despite the fact that adivasis might have to be relocated from Mudumalai Tiger Reserve, if it is established scientifically that this area must be inviolate and if due process is followed according to the Wildlife Protection Act Amendment, 2006, the Forest Department has entertained the possibility of allowing them to stay on inside Mudumalai (Taghioff and Menon 2010). 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 villages in the Masinagudi area such as Anaikatti. This again is the case because adivasis are considered to be rooted in forests, i.e., more deserving of forest rights. As Li (2010), however, argues more generally in the context of Indonesia, indigenous people rarely conform to the stereotypical views that they are constructed in through policy alleviating programmes. One wonders, therefore, how much or not adivasis want to be rooted in nature and remain non-market subjects.

Non-adivasis have equally positioned (or should we say counter-positioned) themselves to fight for their rights to land. Positioning, as Li (2000) argues, can take place on a broad continuum from resistance to internalisation of discourses to the adoption of new subjectivities. Everyday forms of resistance are most common in Gudalur. Many farmers cultivate Section 17 land despite the fact that they do not have title to this land. Others stray into reserved forests or the Mudumalai Tiger Reserve to collect firewood or non-timber forest produce, graze their cattle, and maybe even hunt animals despite the fact that they have no settled rights. Chhatre and Saberwal (2006) highlighted similar actions by local people in the context of the Great Himalayan National Park. All of these everyday acts of resistance, we argue, are acts of positioning that are central to the politics of belonging in Gudalur.

Farmers have also resorted to the law to prove that they belong. 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. Many who cultivated Section 17 land, with the help of an agricultural labourers organisation, claimed that they had been in Gudalur for a long period of time. Farmers have also resorted to government notifications pertaining to recognition of encroached land. In one case, over one hundred families in the Devala area, mostly 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 forest lands 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.

Non-adviasis, who feel their rights to forest land are being denied by the state, are also claiming to be close to nature. 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 and that their identity is enmeshed with topography. The agricultural labour organisation we mentioned earlier has stressed the class dimension of land alienation as a way to emphasise that many non-adviasis (repatriates, Malayalis etc.) have similar histories of marginalisation vis-à-vis conservation policy as do adviasis. Non-Adviasis, including Malayalis and caste Hindus in the Masinagudi area, as Krithivasan (2011) argued, have invoked their padivasi, or half adviasis, 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. In 2008-2009, the first author was part of a research team that undertook a survey in Bharathi Nagar, O'Valley, a region in the south-east 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 jackfruit, mango, areca nut 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 (*Butea 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.<sup>18</sup>

## FUTURE IMAGINATIONS OF LANDSCAPES AND BELONGING

The vexing question of who and what belongs in Gudalur remains centre-stage today. In 2011, the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel, under the Chairmanship of Professor Madhav Gadgil, submitted its report (hereafter known as the Gadgil Report), in which, it recommended that the whole of the Western Ghats be considered an Ecologically Sensitive Area. It further recommended that each taluk<sup>19</sup> within the Western Ghats be classified according to its ecological sensitiveness. Hence, all taluks were categorised as Ecologically Sensitive Zone (ESZ) 1, 2 or 3; ESZ 1 being the most ecologically sensitive. Gudalur and Pandalur, the two taluks comprising the Gudalur area, were classified as ESZ 1 (GoI 2011).

The classification of Gudalur and Pandalur as ESZ 1 has two implications. First, land cannot be converted from forest use to non-forest use. As we have detailed earlier, Gudalur's land status is complicated. While much of Section 17 land is cultivated, farmers do not have title to land. Their likelihood of getting title is also not great given that under the Janmam Abolition Act, the government was allowed to reclaim Section 17 land. Though the government did not for the most part, in 1996, the Supreme Court reprimanded the government in the Godavarman interim judgment and instructed it to do its job of forest conservancy better. In 2003, the Central Empowered Committee told the government that after surveying janmam land it should declare it as reserved forest (Menon 2015). In such a context, the Gadgil Report essentially signed off on the legal status quo, namely that Section 17 lands are forest lands, and therefore, cannot be converted to non-forest use. What this means is that cultivators of Section 17 land in the eyes of the state remain encroachers. Interestingly, however, what the report also said was that adviasis had borne the brunt of forest degradation and had also been denied rights given to them under the Forest Rights Act. The report was, therefore, quite clear about who belonged and who did not to Gudalur.

The Gadgil Report has not been implemented. In 2013, the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) constituted a High Level Working Group with the main purpose of suggesting a way forward that was cognisant of both the Western Ghat's ecological diversity and the livelihoods of those who resided in the Ghats. The ensuing Kasturirangan Report pointed out that approximately 60% of the Western Ghats constituted cultural landscapes as opposed to natural landscapes. The report identified villages that had ESAs. Three villages and two town panchayats in Gudalur were classified as ESAs. While restrictions on development activities were imposed on ESA villages, the thrust of the report was to incentivise villagers to take up more ecologically friendly activities such as organic agriculture, non-timber forest produce collection, ecotourism etc. (GoI 2013).

The Kasturirangan Report has also not been acted upon. Although the report was meant to see how the government could translate the Gadgil Report into action, it too was criticised by state governments. Whereas most states have submitted revised



recommendations to the Union Government, Tamil Nadu has not. In Kerala, as early as 2014, the state government requested the Union Government to exempt plantation and agriculture areas from being declared as ESAs. This request has been made numerous times thereafter. The Tamil Nadu government's position is that it filed objections to the Gadgil Report and that its objections to the Kasturirangan Report are the same (GoI 2013).

What these developments highlight are the different imaginations that bedevil the debate about conservation and livelihoods in areas such as Gudalur. At a Save Western Ghats Movement meeting in July 2017, members highlighted the importance of the Western Ghats as the source of many rivers and made the case that not protecting the Ghats would result in acute water crises in large parts of Tamil Nadu.<sup>20</sup> Wildlife experts and enthusiasts, more specifically, argue that inviolate protected areas and wildlife corridors must be extended given the importance of protecting species such as the tiger and elephant amongst others (Karanth 2003). They also argue that setting a side five percent of India's total land area for protected areas is a low cost to pay socially. 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.

Let us return to the question of belonging. The Gudalur region is now home to over two lac people, many of whom travelled here as part of processes of state-making. Like Saif, they consider Gudalur their home. The reluctance of state governments to accept the Gadgil and Kasturirangan Reports is no doubt partly because the political costs of doing so would be high given the large number of people living in these landscapes. But it is also a recognition that large numbers of people do make their livelihoods from this landscape. What should happen with large numbers of people, especially those who have no land titles, if indeed the creation of ESZs mandates restrictions on their livelihoods or even worse dispossesses them of the land they cultivate? If they cannot belong in Gudalur, where can they belong?

Ethno-environmental fixes might also hide more than they reveal (Forsyth and Walker 2008). Thinking of adivasis as a homogenous and unified group is potentially problematic given that they are heterogeneous in their livelihood patterns. 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 depend to a significant extent 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.

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? If the latter, then surely it is necessary to also problematise human-nature relations more critically in terms of affective ties to nature and whether it is indeed impossible for small farmers to exist in a landscape keeping in mind questions of ecological sustainability?

There is also the troubling question of wildlife beyond borders. Rangarajan et al. (2014: 10) have argued that 'large taxa cannot be easily contained within frontiers of parks and sanctuaries.' 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, there were about five cases<sup>21</sup> and in 2016 the number 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 management practice by the state. And more recently, big corporations seem 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 conservation, people's livelihoods and who can and should belong in such wildlife-demarcated zones.

## CONCLUSION

We have tried, in this article, to delineate the complex politics of belonging in Gudalur, a region that is both ecologically fragile and densely populated with large numbers of small farmers but also large estates. In the process of doing so, we have made a number of points. First, we have illustrated the complex character of migration to the region by multiple communities, mostly seeking to better their lives, so as to emphasise the difficult questions that must be asked about who belongs in Gudalur and conservation landscapes more generally. Second, we unpacked the genealogy of conservation and its multiple meanings and how the idea of a pristine forested landscape has come to dominate conservationists' discourses. Third, we set forth a case for seeing the politics

of belonging as an act of positioning. Here we paid specific attention to how the state has increasingly positioned adivasis as close to nature and in opposition to non-adivasis, and also how non-adivasis have tried to showcase their environmental subjectivity so as to say they too belong.

The conceptual parameters of our argument were built around two ideas: Malkki's (1992) sedentarist metaphysics and Anthias and Radcliffe's (2015) ethno-environmental fix. With the advent of the Forest Rights Act, questions of rootedness and conservation ethics have come to the fore. The Act itself required non-adivasis to show that they had resided in the region for 75 years to claim forest rights whereas adivasis only had to prove residence since 2015 to do the same. We illustrated that in a legally fluid and contested landscape, post-Janmam Abolition Act, this made it all the more difficult for people to claim rights. The indication is, moreover, that if and when the Forest Rights Act is implemented adivasis are more likely than non-adivasis to get rights to forest land. This is the case, not only because of their presumed temporal longevity in the landscape (sedentarist metaphysics) but because conservationists argue that they live symbiotically with nature (ethno-environmental fix).

By conceptualising the politics of belonging in relation to the sedentarist metaphysics and ethno-environmental fixes, we hope to have raised questions about both the social and ecological nature of belonging. How long should people live in landscapes to belong and what makes people environmental subjects? What is a pristine landscape when it has been continuously transformed over the last 150 years? These sets of questions perhaps also require rethinking what we mean by the sedentarist metaphysics and whether or not ethnospatial fixes in a such a mobile and fluid social landscape make sense. In a context where the Supreme Court has told the Tamil Nadu government earlier this year to settle the janman land issue and reclaim forest lands the issues raised in this paper become all the more important.

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### NOTES

1. Pseudonyms are used for people's names but the locations are actual place names.
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. 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).
5. Kovilakam, also spelt as kovilagam by some scholars, denotes the principle palace/estate of princely lineages of Kerala. The Nilambur Kovilakam was an erstwhile royal family based in Nilambur, Kerala.
6. Estimates of long-distance migration of Indian workers between 1846 and 1932 range from 10 to 45 million (Breman 1996: 14) as cited in Li (2009: 71).
7. While many repatriates were absorbed within TANTEA estates, many others were not, and hence, worked on private estates.
8. 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).
9. Letter No. 235, January 26, 1945, from the General Secretary, Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal.
10. *T. N. Godavarman Thirumulpad vs. Union of India & Others* Writ Petition (Civil) 202/1995 Order (dated December 12, 1996).
11. *Ibid.*
12. Central Empowered Committee (Constituted by the Honourable Supreme Court of India in Writ Petition (Civil) No. 202/95 & 171/96).
13. *T. N. Godavarman Thirumulpad vs. Union of India & Others* Writ Petition (Civil) 202/1995 Order dated December 12, 1996).
14. G.O. Ms. 145 dated December 28, 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 'inviolable' core zone. In the case of Mudumalai, the government declared the whole 321 sq. km as the core zone.
15. [www.tiger.ndtv.com](http://www.tiger.ndtv.com)
16. 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.
17. As Anthias and Radcliffe (2015: 257) say, ethno-environmental fixes refer to a 'spectrum of governance approaches that sought to synergise protection of vulnerable populations and highly valued natures from the destructive effects of markets.'
18. See [www.forests.tn.nic.in/graphics/TBGP%20project%20010102011.pdf](http://www.forests.tn.nic.in/graphics/TBGP%20project%20010102011.pdf). Accessed on February 10, 2018.
19. A taluk is a subdivision of a district and is part of the revenue administration of Tamil Nadu.
20. Implement Kasturirangan Committee Recommendations, *The Hindu*, July 5, 2017.
21. Palaniappan, V.S. 'Elephant Attacks Continue to Claim Lives', *The Hindu*, Coimbatore, October 3, 2015.



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