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Landscapes of Intervention and Knowledge: NGOs in the Nilgiris, South India

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree Master of Arts

in

Anthropology

by

Rabindra Clinton Willford

Committee in charge:

Professor Saiba Varma, Chair
Professor Aftab Jassal
Professor David Pedersen

2020

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University of California San Diego

2020

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Landscapes of Intervention and Knowledge: NGOs in the Nilgiris, South India

by

Rabindra Clinton Willford

Master of Arts in Anthropology

University of California San Diego, 2020

Professor Saiba Varma, Chair

In the Nilgiris region in South India, attention to conservation and other land-related issues have been particularly pronounced in recent decades, notably with the rise of global environmentalist movements. In line with the proliferation of NGOs in India at large throughout recent years, the Nilgiris region contains numerous organizations operating over large semi-urban, rural, and forested areas, with diverse ethnic communities, and across the social and political

spectrum at the local level. This thesis attends to this complex landscape through a focus on 1) the different types of aid projects and interventions in the region; 2) the knowledge practices, including the ethnographic and para-ethnographic methods that render these projects intelligible to organizations and stakeholders; and 3) the places, spaces, and subjects that are produced through these projects. The continued force of ethnographic knowledge of tribal/indigenous peoples, long held as objects of radical alterity, remains important to the work of NGOs in India, taking on a new methodological and ideological character while still framed by a long colonial and postcolonial history of enumeration, description, and designation. However, it is not enough to envision NGOs as the antecedents to colonial knowledge. The knowledge about indigenous/tribal communities, which tends to singularize and/or essentialize certain assumptions or cultural traits, also rests upon intimate relations between NGO workers and tribal communities. The second and third chapters expand upon the practices and consequences of forming stable knowledge assemblages while also recognizing the diverse multiplicity of intervention across the social and ecological landscapes of the Nilgiris.

Chapter 1: Introduction

A Kurumba Place, and a Badaga Place

"Careful— watch out for bison."

I heard one of my companions call out the warning from behind me as I slowly walked up the dirt path through the dense forest. There were four of us-- three Badaga men, two elder and one younger, perhaps in his mid 30s, and myself— the intrepid graduate-student ethnographer, or so I imagined myself in the moment. It was a July morning, and despite the rainy season being in full swing, it was already turning out to be a sunny, hot day. We were at Banagudi, a small *shola* (native/old growth) forest and local sacred grove just outside Kotagiri, one of the hill stations in the Nilgiri hills of Tamil Nadu, India.

Wiping away some growing beads of sweat, I took heed of my companion's warning and quickly scanned my surroundings for bison, as it was not unlikely that we would encounter a herd. Startling or straying too close to the large animals could prove to be very dangerous.

"Rabin, have you been here before?" One of the elders, Rev. Philip Mulley asked as he walked beside me.

"Yes, Reverend. Once before, with Keystone. They took us to see the sacred grove and the Kurumba village nearby." I was referring to my time as an undergraduate student, when I had studied abroad in the Nilgiris as part of a research-learning program hosted by the Keystone Foundation, a local NGO. Rev. Mulley seemed to chuckle at this response, and I looked up to see his reaction. He was a tall man, who walked gingerly with a slight limp, with this ubiquitous blue cloth book bag by his side. The Reverend had become one of my main interlocutors in the past two years, and it had been his idea to visit Banagudi on this day.

"I am sure they only told you it was a Kurumba place! But you see, Banagudi has always been a Badaga place," Rev. Mulley said. "Ahh!" I nodded and waited for him to continue. Rev. Mulley and our two other companions were all Badagas, members of the largest ethnic community in the Nilgiris, and one with a contested and paradoxical status as indigenous and/or tribal, but excluded from the state-recognized Scheduled Tribe category.[1] The Kurumbas, meanwhile, are one of the four main Scheduled Tribes in the Nilgiri hills, smaller in number and more readily articulated as indigenous by scholars and NGOs in the area.

As we trekked through the forest, Rev. Mulley described that the Kurumba village at Banagudi was, in his words, actually a "colony," and that local NGOs had collaborated with the Forest Department several years ago to relocate the Kurumba community from another site in a nearby valley that had come under threat of flooding due to its low elevation. For Kurumbas, a complex scenario of ecological pressures and social relationships over time with the land, the state, and local NGOs constitutes Banagudi as, indeed, their place in the present. But for Rev. Mulley, Banagudi becoming known as a "Kurumba place" potentially threatens the maintenance of Badaga cultural heritage and connection to a sacred place. The problem Rev. Mulley was invoking on this hot summer day is tied to understanding how the production, maintenance, and contestation of knowledge and/or information about a place and a people continues to shape and facilitate contemporary projects of aid and governance in the region. Questions of place and identity reached far beyond the mutability of place-names.

[1] Scheduled Tribe designation, under the Indian Constitution, is official state recognition of tribal status according to criteria of "primitivity," "backwardness," and historic isolation from Hindu caste society. The designation privileges tribal groups with affirmative action benefits for education and employment in government positions.

A landscape of intervention and knowledge

In the Nilgiris, as elsewhere, attention to conservation and other land-related issues have been particularly pronounced in recent decades, notably with the rise of global environmentalist movements. [2] In 2000, the Nilgiri hills were designated as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in recognition of their rich biodiversity and ecological fragility (www.unesco.org). The designation called for increased focus on conservation efforts and monitoring of the Western Ghats' ecosystems (of which the Nilgiris are a distinct section). While the hills have attracted international attention as a designated Biosphere Reserve, a number of local organizations combine environmental protection, indigenous rights, and rural development in their work. In other words, NGOs and activists in the region have increasingly coupled environmental protection/conservation together with development initiatives that seek to uplift the region's inhabitants, particularly the indigenous/tribal communities in the hills. In line with the proliferation of NGOs in India at large throughout recent years, the Nilgiris region now contains numerous organizations operating over large semi-urban, rural, and forested areas, with diverse ethnic communities, and across the social and political spectrum at the local level. In order to be effective, aid projects must produce knowledge on, and mediate between the state, other organizations, communities, and ecologies. This thesis is an attempt to understand this complex

[2] International organizations such as the World Wildlife Fund and local NGOs such as the Keystone Foundation and Earth Trust have an established presence in the Nilgiris and work collaboratively on various issues of conservation, sustainable livelihoods, etc. (wwfindia.org; keystone-foundation.org; earthtrustnilgiris.org). In this space of conservation, development, and medical aid work, ethnographic practice (or one might term the "para-ethnographic;" see Holmes and Marcus 2005) and the (re)production of sociocultural knowledge seem to have taken on lives of their own outside of academic confines. However, the Nilgiris have long been an object of anthropological attention, going back to the beginnings of ethnological and ethnographic practice in the mid 19th century (Hockings 2008). This is, in large part, due to the fact that the indigenous peoples and landscapes of the Nilgiris have long captured the fascination of European (and later, North American) observers— and with this extensive historiographic and anthropological record, one can read the workings of the colonial ethnological and enumerative apparatus— the means of making sense of and controlling India's vast diversity (see Dirks 2001)— through this single district with surprising clarity.

landscape of intervention and knowledge through a focus on 1) the different types of aid projects and interventions in the region; 2) the knowledge practices, including the ethnographic and para-ethnographic methods that render these projects intelligible to organizations and stakeholders; and 3) the places, spaces, and subjects that are produced through these projects.

This thesis attends to the production of knowledge about tribal people by NGOs through the encounters and types of projects that facilitate such knowledge. Thus, rather than conceptualizing the Nilgiris as a form of "aidland," as many recent anthropological studies on NGO interventions have done (e.g. Mosse 2011), I anchor NGOs as specific and local features of the sociocultural and ecological landscape of the Nilgiris itself, from the NGO offices, schools, and businesses in the densely populated towns to the rural villages and forests tucked away from the major settlements and roads. I am interested in how such projects are bound up in everyday spaces while also restructuring what these spaces and/or places, and the people that reside, work, or pass through them, can be. Understanding how this landscape is produced and differentiated according to both long-held ideas and knowledge about certain ecological spaces (such as forests and grasslands) and the peoples that inhabit them requires an ethnographic focus on the knowledge practices employed by NGO workers.

I argue that the continued force of ethnographic knowledge of tribal/indigenous peoples, long held as objects of radical alterity, remains important to the work of NGOs, taking on a new methodological and ideological character while still framed by a long colonial and postcolonial history of enumeration, description, and designation. I examine the prevailing significance of ethnographic knowledge, and the production of difference within the "ethno-contemporary"[3] (Middleton 2016), as particularly evident among NGO aid initiatives in the Nilgiris. That is,

[3] What Middleton describes, on a global scale, as a "world deeply affected by ethnological thought" (2016: 8).

whereas colonial governance once employed ethnography as a principal tool of social and political administration, NGOs and activists now engage in their own forms of ethnographic knowledge production towards different goals of aid (i.e. development, conservation, and empowerment) for communities at socioeconomic margins.

There are two types, or modes, of knowledge that shape the continuing production and/or representation of indigenous alterity among aid organizations in the Nilgiris today. One is constituted by the aforementioned colonial knowledge about tribal/indigenous groups and their landscapes, which have sedimented over time through their repetition and re-inscription in the postcolonial archival space of government documents, historical records, academic works, and the Indian Constitution itself. Townsend Middleton (2016) has analyzed how the circulation and reproduction of archived sets of knowledge and criteria for indigeneity or tribal status in India continues to structure interactions and claims among groups aspiring to tribal recognition. The performance of indigenous alterity by communities in the tribal belts of Northeast India (as well as areas in the South, such as the Nilgiris) has become as significant to the politics of recognition as the enumeration and designation of caste and tribe under constitutional frameworks (Middleton 2016; Moodie 2015). However, while the seeping of older colonial/postcolonial forms of knowledge about tribal alterity into the contemporary political and social moment is certainly broadly relevant, it only tells part of the story.

How did Banagudi, for instance, come to be unequivocally a "Kurumba place" in public conversations about place and culture in the Nilgiris, and what role did NGOs and the state play in this process?[4] It is not enough to envision NGOs simply as the antecedents to colonial

[4] Rather than engaging in my own "archaeology of knowledge" à la Foucault (1972), I am rather interested in the contemporary practices that draw simultaneously upon an archive of difference and the technical and immediate needs that caring for others demands.

knowledge. Rather, I argue that knowledge about indigenous/tribal communities, which tends to singularize and/or essentialize certain assumptions or cultural traits, also rests upon intimate relations between NGO workers and tribal communities. In other words, the quotidian knowledge production of NGOs is simultaneously bound up with the intimacy between NGO workers and community members, leading to a situated knowledge that evades the singularizing character of institutional and/or formal units of information found in organizational documents and official policy narratives (see Watanabe 2019). This is the second type of knowledge at work, in addition to the sediments of the colonial archive. Contrary to longstanding anthropological critiques of NGOs as external, homogenous, and ahistorical (Mosse 2005), recent anthropological work has shown how NGOs themselves are dynamic, situated, contingent, and diverse in their actions, decisions, and narratives (Watanabe 2019: 61; also see Sharma 2008; Bornstein 2012; Gupta 2012). In this thesis, I understand the knowledge practices of NGOs as "para-ethnographic"—as both producing official and authoritative knowledge, classifications and statistics about tribal communities, but also as intimate, interpersonal, and intersubjective.

To understand how NGOs produce and mediate different forms of knowledge, I draw on anthropological understandings of the term "para-ethnographic," which describes the knowledge practices of contemporary NGOs, central bankers, and other modern institutional workers (Holmes and Marcus 2005; Riles 2006). Following Holmes and Marcus (2005), the para-ethnographic is a way to understand NGO work beyond the technocratic aspects of developmental or ecological intervention. How do NGOs mediate between the intimate, anecdotal information between community members and themselves and their own need to produce research reports and publications? David Mosse (2005) argues that development projects are driven by the need to maintain relationships with stakeholders and systems of

representation that allow for their legitimization. As such, NGOs must draw upon established, codified knowledge about tribal peoples as well as the contemporary para-ethnographic practices, such as face-to-face interactions and relations of trust, in order to "sustain policy models offering a significant interpretation of events" (Mosse 2005: 17). Ultimately, NGOs seek stable sets of knowledge about their objects of need in order to sustain their projects of intervention.

While it is true that ethnographic representation has often been slotted and, in fact, historically utilized as a means of surveillance and governance through its codified forms, a reworking and repositioning of ethnographic knowledge holds great potential. Annelise Riles (2017) has recently commented upon the imperative centrality of ethnographic knowledge in the wake of breakdown in transnational dialogue.[5] A focus on outputs— units of ethnographic information that can be mobilized within discourses towards practical ends—have long been the emphasis for NGO aid actors; this is where the value of anthropologists involved in such ventures is seen by these actors (Riles 2017: 187). However, it is necessary to understand how outputs are framed and guided so as to maintain their contextual significance, rather than giving in to instrumentalist tendencies. Lawrence Cohen (2012) similarly notes how transnational aid organizations seeking human rights and/or justice come to assume positions as para-ethnographic enterprises; but rather than allowing ethnography to become generalized and instrumentalized, a reterritorialization that actually anchors the contextual particularities of place and culture is required (Cohen 2012: 70, 87-92). Part of understanding these contextual particularities is recognizing that the projects supported by these para-ethnographic practices often diverge in

[5] Riles has observed how confidence in dialogue and building consensus has virtually disappeared—for example, the United Nations no longer holds global conferences due to the gridlock of disagreement that has come to be the norm (2017: 184).

very specific ways, indicating (again) that we cannot understand the category of development or conservation aid as homogenous (Watanabe 2019). These next two chapters examine the practices and consequences of forming stable knowledge assemblages while also recognizing the multiplicity and/or diversity of intervention across the social and ecological landscapes of the Nilgiris.

Chapter 2: Stabilizing knowledge, legitimizing aid

How do NGOs enact these diverse projects and maintain trust and access to communities, while simultaneously building expert authority on the needs and dynamics of tribal communities, often based on their deviation from the expected norms of the local or regional (or even national) social mainstream? During my fieldwork, I interviewed directors and project managers from a number of organizations in the Nilgiris in order to gain a sense of how NGO representatives described their work. In each interview, the director or manager would essentially convey their "official" description about the work they do, including about the communities that require their help, and the most significant issues they are addressing. However, in addition to the legal and political rationalities of funding agencies, state interests, and stakeholders that influence policy narratives, such official descriptions are also built out of personal experiences and relationships between aid workers and community members. How do the anecdotal, quotidian information that are produced in these interpersonal relations feed back into the reports, policies, or even descriptions of the NGO's work? I argue that the para-ethnographic operates as the crucial space that forms the anecdotal and practical experience of NGO workers as they make sense of the issues they are framing upon indigenous groups, beyond the technocratic aspects of

developmental or ecological intervention. The production and gatekeeping of sociocultural expertise circumscribes both people and place, and structures dependency in a way that allows NGOs to maintain trust and access to communities. Through research projects, publications, and stakeholder collaborations, NGOs build expertise on tribal needs. At the same time, I also observed how workers from the Keystone Foundation engaged in conversations with Kurumba villagers about their everyday predicaments—the stress of traveling several miles through the forest to even access a main road in order to reach a hospital, for example.

Here, the "para-ethnographic" describes this quotidian production and maintenance of knowledge among contemporary NGOs. Following Holmes and Marcus' (2005) observations of the para-ethnographic practices among technocratic-oriented central bankers in the United States, I argue that the para-ethnographic operates as the crucial space that forms the anecdotal and practical experience of NGO workers as they make sense of the issues they are framing upon indigenous groups, beyond the technocratic aspects of developmental or ecological intervention. This production of information serves to continually construct the object of need for NGO interventions. While building objects of need is typically instrumentalist in nature, in practice such knowledge is often highly contingent, arbitrary, and informed by pre-conceived notions about tribal others in India. NGO workers in the Nilgiris are typically middle-class Indians who either came from nearby cities or grew up in the hills in the larger Tamil communities of the towns. Through exposure to local, regional, or national discourse about tribal issues in India, as well as their own liberal education in universities, workers bring their own patchwork of assumptions and facts about tribal social and cultural life, which coalesce in the focused efforts of these organizations as they simultaneously research the communities and their issues and implement projects of intervention. The NGOs' representations of their work were available to

myself over the course of my fieldwork as I interviewed directors and project managers from a number of organizations in the Nilgiris last year.

My recent fieldwork in the Nilgiris has pointed to a number of important questions surrounding indigenous belonging, sovereignty, and rights, particularly with regards to the Forest Rights Act of 2006. Scheduled Tribes in the Nilgiris, such as the Kurumbas and Irulas, have worked with local NGOs to stake out their right to reside on, cultivate, and collect from their traditional forest lands. Some organizations also have linked tribal patrimony over land to ecological conservation, arguing that land practices such as traditional grazing contribute to stewardship of the environment. Other NGOs focus their efforts on socioeconomic empowerment and infrastructural development in both tribal and non-tribal communities in the Nilgiris. In each of these cases, NGOs pose themselves as authoritative arbiters of social and cultural information in a way that works to rationalize their presence on the local social landscape to both myself, the ethnographer, and themselves, the aid practitioners. In the end, I come to realize that the conversation does not actually directly involve the subjectivities of the people or the places we are talking about, but rather involves simplified units of information that serve to make sense of human difference and need—in this case, among the indigenous people of the Nilgiri hills. Still, over the course of my fieldwork, I picked up on certain differences in what kind of information was being emphasized and how NGOs were representing their work. This multiplicity of interventions reflects the various projects (e.g. rights, socioeconomic development, etc.) at work, but also indicates diverse political and/or ideological orientations that structure a typology of aid. In addition to these ongoing orientations, NGOs continue to traffic in local historiographies and public discourses that support certain assumptions and/or

associations about tribal lives, cultures, and places, all of which inform their work together with the multiplicities of contemporary political interests, as I examine in the next section.

Typologies of aid

In India, maintaining knowledge of tribal groups as sociocultural others through these established and recurrent pieces of information proves productive for the provision of aid (i.e. for articulating need), but it also illuminates an underlying paradox: that the existence of aid organizations is predicated upon the impossibility of such marginal groups realizing the collective modernity preached at various political levels. The Indian neoliberal state, or specifically state agencies such as the Forest Department and district-level development programs, are often dependent on the NGO sector for administering to the needs of vast sections of society, leading to the mutual reinforcement of the state and the para-state (see Gupta 2012). This institutional nexus often designates, or slots, indigenous groups in a perpetuating state of otherness (Trouillot 1991; Li 2000). The tribal alterity that is constructed and maintained in order to make these aid projects in part possible converges with the intimate proximities that are found in the everyday relations between aid workers and communities. This convergence of alterity-making practices and quotidian intimacies reflect the underlying and contrasting ideological tensions between state and para-state discourse, between projects of equality and difference, and between neoliberal discourses of empowerment and consolidated rights/citizenship within the nation-state. I primarily describe two types of projects that are being carried out by most NGOs in the Nilgiris today: those projects revolving around land, tradition, and rights to forest use, on the one hand, and projects oriented towards "empowerment" or socioeconomic uplift. As such,

the ethnographic framings of indigenous groups are positioned to support agendas of both traditionality and modernity.

Aradhana Sharma (2008) has shown that empowerment initiatives are a particular reflection of neoliberal governmentality in globalized spaces today, representing a break from older projects of welfare in India that prioritized national development as a goal (also see Gupta and Sharma 2006). This analysis indicates how empowerment has assumed a new moral and political standing as a summarily developmentalist and modernist pursuit within projects focused on marginal groups in India (Gupta and Sharma 2006; Sharma 2008). But whereas Gupta and Sharma (2006) point to divergent political ideologies from different periods in the history of India's post-Independence development to describe two different organizations based on welfare and empowerment, respectively, we can reframe our understanding of NGO programs in India in terms of a landscape or terrain of aid—one that envelops multiple social, ecological, political, and spatial registers. In other words, it is not only a question of the state and its disaggregation among para-state entities such as NGOs, activists, and communities themselves, but rather also a question of how local historiographies and sociocultural phenomena such as indigenous identity and spiritual ties to places (such as Banagudi) become richly involved in projects that one can summarily term "welfare," "empowerment," or "traditional rights."

On the axis of traditionality, NGOs such as the Keystone Foundation are guided by environmentalist concerns that privilege the relationships between forest-dwelling tribes in the Nilgiris and the conservation of healthy upland forests. However, I would suggest that this environmentalist focus unintentionally ties back into the spatialized assumptions found in earlier sets of colonial knowledge about tribes and forests in India, slotting both as wild and primitive. Due to the need to emphasize the role of indigenous peoples in maintaining healthy forests in

India and therefore promoting tribes' own access and rights to their lands, NGOs reflect the epistemological underpinnings of India's postcolonial sociology (or at least, the side that supports the continued separation of isolated tribal life from the constructed modernity of urban life today). Banagudi is so readily designated a Kurumba place in part because of the Kurumba's historical association with forests in the colonial and postcolonial archive of the Nilgiris.

Another example is the Forest Rights Act implementation process, a project of foremost concern among many NGOs in the Nilgiris. The process of advocating for these rights to be granted to communities that have been historically disenfranchised of their forest lands requires, again, drawing upon established associations between tribal peoples and forests; the paradox being that in order to access these rights, the communities (with the aid of NGOs) must continue to enact and maintain their primitivity in local and national discourse. In the Nilgiris, the narrated associations and facts about tribes provides the historical knowledge that ultimately supports the work of NGOs in the region; Mosse (2005) and Middleton (2016) observed similar continuities of knowledge in their respective fieldwork in central and northeast India. NGO workers, activists, and scholars are often reading the same material that has been recycled back several decades, all the way back to colonial censuses, records, manuals, etc.

In early canonical writings about tribes and castes, such as those by H.H. Risley (1891) and E. Thurston (1909), a combination of Orientalist romanticism and racialized assumptions about tribal peoples in India colored their ethnological descriptions. The categories that emerged in later printed forms of colonial codification, enumeration, and description (in censuses, gazetteers, manuals, etc.) were largely sourced from the accumulation of ethnographic information in the early accounts of the 19th century (Dirks 2001). British systems of governance, under the administrative unit of the Madras Presidency, were founded upon these

early perceptions and treatments of local historical narratives that combined to frame each group in a certain fashion (Cederlöf 2002). Colonial writers sustained and developed these framings, evident throughout the body of early ethnological/ethnographic work, as narrated historical fact.

The historian Gunnel Cederlöf has observed that the narratives generated in early colonial writing were reproduced and combined into a 'Nilgiris story' for the purpose of controlling public memory and asserting the legitimacy of colonial rule (2002: 326). This 'story' was really the repeated use of certain phrases and ideas in the historical record to describe each group, their lands, and their livelihoods, as well as emphasizing the role of the British in civilizing and developing the hills throughout the 19th century (Cederlöf 2002: 322-323). As British administration of the hills developed over time, these writers developed a public historiography in the form of Gazetteers, manuals, reports, and surveys that functioned to aid and affirm the governance of the Nilgiris district, particularly in the early 20th century (for example, see Grigg 1880, Francis 1910). These forms of public information were, in turn, used by more ethnographers in the early to mid 20th century, recycling essentially the same information and reaffirming its supposed legitimacy through its repeated appearance (Radhakrishna *in* Pati 2011: 48). Though there was some variation in the early colonial accounts, the emergence of a singular narrative made descriptions of each community standard and consistent. The Kurumbas were linked to forests and forest livelihoods, while the Badagas and Todas have long been associated with agriculture and pastoralism, in contrast. In the next section, I describe how Banagudi reflects the continuation of these narratives and the connected roles of communities and NGOs. This specific instance of NGO work produced a dominant outcome/representation in local conversations about an indigenous group's place and needs.

Sacred grove, tribal forest

` To better grasp the implications of NGO knowledge, I must first return to that summer day at Banagudi. My Badaga companions and I eventually trekked off the main path, weaving our way through the undergrowth and brushing aside branches, until we reached several stone circles. Rev. Mulley told me that these were ancestral burial circles, as I observed how some were still being maintained by Badagas while others were left to the overgrowth of the forest because those families had no living descendants. We moved onwards until we came upon more, larger stone circles, but enclosed within these circles were shrines as well. These were Badaga shrines, according to my companions.

"This is a very important Badaga place!" Rev. Mulley asserted to me. "Badagas come here once a year for a ritual prayer."

With Badagas typically only visiting the site once a year, Banagudi was clearly not a place with a regular *physical* Badaga presence, but it seemed to be one with a strong spiritual and cultural connection to the community. In contrast, the Kurumbas living nearby were physically present within the sacred grove forest on a daily basis, while also maintaining and worshipping at several of the shrines within the forest.

Rev. Mulley would go on to explain a great deal further about what he seemed to perceive as an epistemological and/or discursive injustice against Badagas: namely, that Banagudi seems to be popularly known as a Kurumba place in the Nilgiris, rather than a Badaga place. My conversations with Rev. Mulley and other Badagas typically reflect a sense of pride about their places and communities, but also anxious belonging due to their contested indigeneity in the Nilgiris; the need to affirm their belonging in the Nilgiris adds even greater importance to maintaining cultural and religious connections to places such as Banagudi. Despite Rev.

Mulley's strong opinions, I was not invested in documenting whether a certain place ought to be known one way rather than another, but rather in noting how such places are locally contested. Furthermore, as is quite typical of South Asian landscapes, the cultural and spiritual geography of the Nilgiris contains a great deal of historical and contemporary overlap among places of significance for multiple communities. Thus, Badagas and Kurumbas often do share the same sacred sites, together with other tribal or even non-tribal, Hindu communities in the hills. Moreover, there is evidence in Badaga oral histories to suggest that forest resources such as honey were traditionally significant to Badaga livelihoods as well, in addition to their more typical definition as herders and cultivators.

This, however, makes it all the more interesting that places, particularly forest sites, in the Nilgiris come to assume dominant identities, associated with a particular community. Of course, this is nothing new; colonial accounts long attributed different landscapes and/or sites to the livelihoods and habitations of the different groups they encountered. The Todas, for example, have long been strongly associated with the montane grasslands at the highest elevations of the Nilgiris massif. The Kurumbas, in contrast, were established in very early colonial writings as forest dwellers, and thereafter the discursive and imaginative associations between the Kurumbas and forests in the Nilgiris have repeated and solidified in contemporary understandings.[6] Colonial writings did more than just introduce spatial associations, however, and the ethnographic descriptions of tribes in the Nilgiris were laden with moral framings as well. British observers considered the Kurumbas, through their association with the hot, dense forests at the lower elevations of the Nilgiris, to be savage, wild, and primitive. The Todas, on the other hand, reflected the nobility and vitality of the grasslands they lived and herded their buffalo upon. The

[6] See Burton 1851; King 1870; Rivers 1906; etc.

Badagas, interestingly, were taken early on to be a hardworking but mundane tribe of peasants, hardly with association to the "wild" forests that were tucked away at the Nilgiris slopes.

While the weight of racialized moral observation has diminished through time, colonial writers and scholars who have subsequently studied the Nilgiris have generally repeated the framings of each community simply through the practice of reading the existing literature on the communities. As such, each group is continually articulated as fitting a particular kind of landscape and/or place in the Nilgiris. NGOs such as Keystone have read ethnographic reports and studies themselves; this literature contributes to discussions about policy and practice within organizations, but it also reflects wider conversations about the cultural and social makeup and the history of the region, the "Nilgiris story" (Cederlöf 2002). These conversations permeate beyond NGOs and shape narratives in newspapers and tourist advertisements or magazines, for example. In each instance, Kurumbas are always associated with the forest landscapes, while Badagas and Todas generally lack any association with the forests.

It is an interesting coincidence that the colonial associations between primitive tribes and forests more recently dovetails with an emphasis in global indigenous activist and environmentalist discourses on the connections between indigenous peoples and ecological harmony, or conservation. Here, Rev. Mulley's account comes back into focus as he describes to me how the Kurumbas apparently came to Banagudi several decades ago. With the collaboration of the Tamil Nadu Forest Department and another organization called NAWA, Keystone helped relocate the Kurumbas to their present location at Banagudi due to pressures of flooding at their site at a lower elevation, near Banagudi. When Keystone continued the work of promoting conservation at Banagudi, they were "promoting eco-tourism in the name of the *indigenous* Kurumbas" according to Rev. Mulley. Due to Banagudi's proximity to the town of Kotagiri, it

was indeed a suitable eco-tourism site for those wanting to see a remnant shola forest in the Nilgiris. Rev. Mulley further explained that Kurumbas from the nearby village also come and regularly give offerings to some of the existing shrines that the Badagas used as well. He said that their use of these shrines contributes to the image of the sacred grove being historically a Kurumba place. He then also told me that neither the Forest Department nor Keystone want to talk about the bull pens and other shrines within the forest which might indicate a greater Badaga presence, as this might delegitimize the Kurumba access and/or rights over the place.

Whether or not his side of the story was true, it was clear to me at the time that Banagudi was generally regarded as a Kurumba place because of the group's physical presence and various relationships to the forest as a place of worship, livelihoods, and resources such as firewood, honey, fruits, etc. It was not generally known as a Badaga place in local discourse, outside of Badaga knowledge itself. However, my conversations with workers at Keystone also indicated that the organization has been very conscious of the needs and deprivation of the Kurumba community through their many years of working with them. No one, including Rev. Mulley, would deny that the Kurumbas hold a crucial relationship with forests such as Banagudi for the continuation of their traditional lifeways. But through their reading of existing literature, technical para-ethnographic experience, and historical consciousness of the "Nilgiris story," NGO workers, in the case of Banagudi, have contributed to solidifying the associations of a particular tribal group with forest and sacred grove, and unintentionally silenced the quotidian recognition of another group in relation to the place. In the next chapter, I attend to the broader landscape of NGO interventions to understand what types of projects are being undertaken, as well as the ideological and political complexities that tribal persons ultimately confront when interacting with these NGOs.

Chapter 3: Comparing NGO interventions and their representations

Looking beyond Banagudi, the Nilgiris region is dotted with NGOs working on various issues such as empowerment, infrastructure, and rights, as I have previously described. Rajni Kothari (1987) argues that the expansion of NGOs in India at large reflects a dispersal of liberalized aid that is guided by the transnational, technology-driven capitalism emerging in the late 20th century; in other words, acting as a kind of delivery system of state aid to the rural hinterlands, in the service of this new world capitalism (1987: 2182). Kothari's take is concerned with the corporate power that the NGO sector can exert in areas of India that have, until quite recently, been taken as inherently rural and detached from world economic systems. Macro-scale perspectives on the NGO sector such as Kothari's are nuanced further by Gupta and Sharma's (2006) work, which notes the neoliberal shifts at the end of the 20th century as having an effect on the ideological orientations of NGO projects, particularly orienting development aid towards empowerment as a central imperative.

However, it is important to look more closely and comparatively at the multiple and diverse interventions across a local landscape, rather than just categorizing aid within broad political-economic systems or development ideologies. By seeing multiplicity and difference among aid projects across a shared physical and cultural landscape, we can better attend to the multiple and fluid orientations of care and needs on the part of both aid workers and tribal persons in India today. For example, Erica Bornstein's (2012) work on humanitarianism and philanthropy in India reframed our understanding of NGO work and activism as guided not necessarily by development ideologies and transnational economic interests, by rather by local and cultural meanings attributed to acts of giving (e.g. the Hindu concept of *dan* as inspiring a local ethos of giving that differs from humanitarian impulses found elsewhere). Bornstein

particularly draws our attention to the fact that aid workers (and philanthropical volunteers outside of the NGO sector) have diverse ethical orientations connected to broader notions of morality and philanthropy in Indian society (2012: 51-55)— practices that are not always captured in our anthropological focus on the organizational structures, tensions, and imperatives of aid work. Mosse (2005) also notes how even projects that traffic and assert themselves in terms of "local knowledge" often mask diverse needs and perspectives, particularly because those units of local knowledge are normative constructs borne out of consensus-building between workers and community members (2005: 95). In the next section, I describe how NGOs conveyed their own constructed representations of their work— choices that indicate what pieces of information are rendered important and authoritative, but not necessarily reflective of the contingencies and indeterminacies within interpersonal encounters and daily life among both workers and communities.

Visits to five organizations

In order to understand what other kinds of projects NGOs were engaging in the Nilgiris today, and how they were talking about them, I dropped in to their offices and interviewed whoever was willing to speak with me— in this case, it was typically the directors or project managers as, I assume, they are most accustomed to speaking with visitors. The first organization I visited was the Keystone Foundation, as I was staying just next door. I first met with one of the directors, Sita, who told me about the recent plans, developments, and goals of the organization since my last visit. Within the past year, Keystone had restructured their programs to bring certain issues such as community livelihoods and health (previously separate) under the same program, which they now called Community Wellness. Sita told me that this grouping made more sense given the coherence of the ways in which multiple aspects of

community life, including their agriculture, health, and social unity, were tied together. By addressing these various but interconnected issues through a single project team, Sita felt that communication and problem-solving with the communities could be better accomplished.

We also discussed Keystone's various "area centers"—located in areas central to different tribal and rural communities across the region. Sita described these area centers as taking on a more autonomous, community-centered role. Whereas Keystone, as a kind of parent entity for these area centers, used to have a greater presence in the communities before 2015, the area centers themselves are now providing better forms of community governance as they are almost entirely run by villagers themselves. Sita feels that this shift is important to break down any structure of dependency and promote tribal self-sufficiency.

I spoke with another Keystone director, Amrita, who is in charge of the ecological conservation program. Keystone's conservation program has been working on developing a Conservation Stewardship model among the communities. These are conservation agreements between the NGO, communities, and the Forest Department, getting all parties to agree to eco-development and conservation measures. Amrita also emphasized that Keystone wanted to expand the definition of conservation to include community methods such as traditional grazing, and to propose how such methods can maintain and even improve conservation. The Forest Department has been historically resistant to these measures, so the Conservation Stewardship model is an attempt to coax their cooperation. In July, during the time I was there, there was a large meeting in one of the tribal areas (though I could not attend because of the aforementioned visa issue) in which physical contracts were being signed by all parties to establish the Conservation Stewardship model.

The next organization I visited was the Nilgiris Adivasi Welfare Association (NAWA). NAWA is one of the oldest NGOs in the Nilgiri hills, having been founded in 1958. The founder was a man named Narahimsan, who was a friend of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru at the time. I spoke with the Secretary of NAWA, a man named M. Alwas. Mr. Alwas described to me the aims and projects of the organization. NAWA is largely funded by both the Indian federal and Tamil Nadu state government, and I was told that their first and foremost aim is to provide health and medical treatment to tribal populations in the area. Mr. Alwas told me that "if health is addressed first, all other issues can be addressed better." NAWA has their own hospitals in several difference places (Kolikarai, Kotagiri, Chamrajnagar, to name a few), as well as mobile outreach units (medical vans) that bring aid directly to communities (vaccines, medicine, etc.). They also conduct their own medical research, particularly on sickle cell anemia. A 2001 pilot study, with a 3,000-person population sample, found that 2% of the population had sickle cell anemia, with it being more prevalent among communities living at the lower elevations with higher malaria rates. Mr. Alwas continues to describe NAWA's various programs, including mental health counseling, education (they have their own school at their campus in Kotagiri), and a livelihood program. NAWA encourages tribal persons to settle in one place, and then go for employment opportunities in the towns and cities. My impression was that there is less emphasis on traditional livelihoods in NAWA than there is in Keystone. NAWA works closely with the government to facilitate schemes for tribal employment, such as providing employment in BPO call centers in partnership with TATASky.

I met with three other organizations during my time there: Island Trust, Rural Development Organization (RDO), and Udhagamandalam Social Services (USS). I interviewed Arun, the director of Island Trust, a small NGO that is also based in Kotagiri. He tells me that the

organization started as the Indo-Sri Lankan Development Trust, working with Tamil repatriates since the 1964 repatriation agreement between Indian and Sri Lankan governments. During the period of repatriation in the late 20th century, 600,000 Sri Lankan Tamils were resettled in Tamil Nadu, and 2,000 hectares of forest was destroyed to create new tea estates for many of the repatriates (called the TANTEA initiative). Arun tells me more of this history and describes Island Trust's work over time with the repatriate community. The Repatriates faced discrimination as they were viewed as outsiders, but over time they gained local political power and social belonging with the aid of Island Trust. In 2001, the organization decided that the repatriate communities no longer required their aid, so they shifted their focus to other communities (tribal, Dalit). Island Trust's main initiative with these groups has been rights-based education and advocacy, particularly with regard to the 2006 Forest Rights Act. Due to an injunction made against the Act in Tamil Nadu, the implementation of the Act has been largely blocked over time. Organizations such as Keystone and Island Trust have worked hard to educate communities on the legal process for claiming rights, particularly with regards to forest lands and resources.

RDO is the next organization I visited. This NGO is located in Coonoor and was founded in 1980. I was able to have an interview with one of the project managers, named Abhishek. He told me that during their first 25 years, their main focus was providing education to rural poor in the district. Since then, however, they have chiefly focused on sanitation and related development. An initial survey conducted by the organization found that 70% of rural people in the Nilgiris did not have toilets. In order to address this issue, the RDO has emphasized self-help training—ie., teaching children how to construct and use toilets so that they can more effectively learn and teach others in the communities. RDO also works closely with local governance in

order to gain funding and infrastructural support for improving sanitation. RDO also emphasizes clean water recycling, and they have built water filtration units in villages and at schools. Other projects conducted by RDO include women's empowerment (training for various activities such as farming, tea picking, and securing bank loans), support for traditional medicine, and a "childline" program (a hotline for at-risk youth, or those in need of rescuing from an abusive situation).

Finally, USS in Ootacamund appeared to be a somewhat similar organization to RDO. I met with the Executive Director, Rev. Fr. D. Solomon, and one of their project directors, Sanjana. During this interview, Rev. Solomon and Sanjana described how their organization emphasizes training to promote self-sufficiency, rather than charity. USS has been operating in Ootacamund for about 60 years, and started out as a Christian charity organization, providing food and other basic needs such as wheat, oil, clothes, and medicine. This fell under a broader framework of social work through the diocese there. The directors tell me that the shift from charity to a training model was pushed by their foreign funding agencies, though they did not tell me when this shift took place, or why. The organization frames issues of rights and livelihoods as the most pressing. USS thus conducts a number of programs, such as the promotion of traditional agriculture, skill-training to complement school education, family aid (monthly stipend and counseling for income generation), house-building, and self-help (particularly with bank loans and credit). USS has also been trying to address suicides, particularly among tribal communities in the Gudalur area. The directors described some of the challenges they have faced with this initiative, as the communities are difficult to access and bring together, and they do not readily provide information to outsiders. Keystone has also tried addressing the issue in other

areas of the Nilgiris, with similar trends being observed; the suicides are mostly young women, and many of the communities are reluctant to disclose information about the deaths.

Expressing authority and need

I describe these encounters as the NGO directors described their work to me—as a performance of authoritative fact. I did come away from these meetings feeling quite impressed with all the work that these NGOs were doing in the region. This is, of course, their intention. NGOs, at least in the "official" descriptions coming from the tops of the organizations (i.e. directors, project managers, trustees) want to represent their work in a particular way in order to legitimize their place as benefactors to local communities (and as such, accepted by the communities), and thus NGOs accomplish this in two ways. First, they describe the needs of the communities and immediately connect these needs to their projects of intervention, so that ultimately their work appears inevitable and laden with expertise. Second, NGOs want their work to sound successful, a judgement irrespective of what the actual effects of their work is on the ground (Mosse 2005: 19).

When I asked each director to describe their organization's work, they explicitly connected their projects to lofty goals such as socioeconomic empowerment, tribal self-sufficiency, and so forth. As Mosse (2005) argues, development organizations must typically represent a version of themselves that emphasizes a key policy narrative and makes an impression upon those looking from the outside in, such as myself. Furthermore, organizations want to emphasize their expertise in order to legitimize their work. None of this is surprising, but these self-representations that NGOs engage in also have implications for their objects of need. That is, while the needs of communities that NGO directors are articulating are certainly real,

these representations often obscure more complex scenarios regarding livelihoods, identities, and needs within communities or even among different groups, as is the case at Banagudi. However, I now want to shift away from how NGOs were representing themselves to me, and rather more closely compare two of these organizations, NAWA and Keystone, in order to understand how their work connects to their respective political, spatial, and intimate/interpersonal contexts in divergent ways.

NAWA and Keystone

As I have briefly mentioned, NAWA and Keystone diverge in notable ways and are suitable examples of the different types of projects that are at work in the Nilgiris. Here, I want to note characteristics that contribute to an understanding of NGOs as constituting a landscape of aid encoded with different political ideologies and guided by different ethical discourses and subjectivities. There exists a connection to broader, regional and national ideologies differentially sourcing from postcolonial narratives of development, neoliberal shifts in recent decades, and environmentalist and indigenous activist movements. For example, NAWA's guiding philosophy of health first, and everything else being contingent on good health, is particularly notable as it upholds a biopolitical focus on the maintenance of a productive tribal citizenry. Thus, NAWA is highly active in providing vaccines and medication to tribal villages while strongly encouraging those who are ill to attend their hospitals. NAWA also engages in (what they would term) empowerment projects that helps to train tribal persons for "modern" lines of work, such as the TATASky call center. These projects are guided by both neoliberal impulses towards becoming self-empowered through a modern workforce and productive through good health, and by continuing ideologies of postcolonial development and

modernization by emphasizing how tribal persons must engage in productive lines of work such as national telecommunications.

Keystone, however, is far more interested in upholding the traditional rights and livelihoods of tribal people in the Nilgiris. This is inspired by both environmentalism and indigenous activism that emphasizes the stewardship roles that indigenous peoples play in caring for the environment. Thus, Keystone encourages tribal communities such as the Kurumbas to continue culturally and traditionally significant practices such as honey collection, rather than abandoning these livelihoods entirely for wage work in the towns and cities. Keystone has also worked extensively to help communities claim forest rights, with the expectation that tribal peoples will continue to reside on, and care for, forest lands. We can also observe these differences in projects spatially and aesthetically. Whereas NAWA is centralized, with a school and hospital in the town of Kotagiri and an emphasis on integrating tribal lifeways with urban sensibilities, Keystone is committed to a more decentralized approach that allows for autonomous area centers where tribal persons can engage in their own community projects.

However, we should note that both NAWA and Keystone enact projects that, in part, hinge on indigeneity and/or tribal alterity, albeit in different ways. NAWA emphasizes tribal wellbeing and empowerment through bringing communities into engagement with urban and "modern" jobs, medicine, and education. Keystone rather relies on connotations of indigeneity that slots them within rural, forest landscapes committed to certain types of traditional livelihoods, such as honey collection, buffalo grazing, millet agriculture, and so on. Comparing NAWA and Keystone in this way indicates how indigenous/tribal persons in the Nilgiris are facing divergent pressures and projects that tell them different things about what to make of their identities and everyday lives. This is occurring at the same time as the formations of NGO

expertise that seek to assert that these projects are doing some kind of good *because* they hinge in part on the alterity of tribal persons in relation to NGO workers; but as I have shown, these constructions of knowledge are simultaneously borne out of intimate settings such as Banagudi where multiple orientations towards a place meet head on.

Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, I have shown that NGOs in the Nilgiris are producing and projecting information that makes their work possible in a technical sense, and legitimate (clear-cut and conforming to policy narratives) in a discursive sense, and simultaneously situated within a complex, local terrain of spaces, places, and identities. This landscape of intervention is also connected to broader political and development ideologies. Further research is necessary for understanding how tribal persons in the Nilgiris are navigating the multitude of aid projects and their implications for rights, livelihoods, health, and so forth. For example, Banagudi is an interesting case because multiple sets of actors such as Badagas, Kurumbas, Forest Department officials, and NGO workers continue to use, worship, and traverse the space. However, there was concern on the part of my Badaga interlocutors that the lack of local recognition of Banagudi as a Badaga place could ultimately lead to a disenfranchisement of some kind. Meanwhile, many Badagas also work in NGOs such as NAWA and Keystone and must reconcile anxieties of indigenous belonging in the Nilgiris with the projects that are designed to help prop up the indigeneity, and accompanying rights, of other groups such as the Kurumbas. These questions of subjectivity and negotiation must be further examined while retaining this backdrop of intervention and knowledge—one that is continually changing and situated at numerous cultural, political, and spatial registers.

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