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# The Confessions of a Goat: An Oral History on the Resistances of an Indigenous Community

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### Abstract

Betta Kurumba is an indigenous (also known as Adivasi / tribal) community living in the Gudalur block of Nilgiris district, Tamil Nadu, India. This district is part of the Western Ghats mountain range that runs parallel to the Western Coast of India. It is an anthropological research on a hamlet, Koodamoola, located inside a tea and coffee plantation, the Golden Cloud Estate (pseudonym). Few years ago, the owner (under legal contestation) of this plantation attempted to enforce a ban on rearing of livestock arbitrarily. Betta Kurumbas did not agree to this enforcement since they are the ancient inhabitants of this forest (now, plantations) and they resisted. Ethnography, oral history, and in-depth interviews are the methods used to understand their everyday resistances. The field intricacies such as powerlessness, atrocities and litigations forced me to narrate their resistances through the voice of a goat (a metaphor) and I have incorporated both factual and fictional elements. I neither attempting here to exaggerate nor demean the community by this way of narration. In broader context, I have written this story from a postmodern perspective. This paper brings forth multiple facets of their realities, power nexus between capitalists and apparatuses of the State, differences between and within the indigenous communities, and resistances as negotiations.

### Keywords

Betta Kurumba, Indigenous Community, Everyday Resistance, Janmam Land, Coffee and Tea Plantations

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It was mid-July, 2013, and the Southwest monsoon had just begun in Gudalur. It was cold and the entire town was covered by fog. I woke up late and started my day slowly. The room that I rented was located at the foothills of a mountain. I leisurely heated the water on a hotplate as there was no geyser facility and went to bath reluctantly. After covering myself with enough warm clothes, I started walking towards the bus station. The road was uneven but walking kept me fit during my days of fieldwork. After the breakfast in a hotel nearby I took a share-auto to the Golden Cloud Estate. I travelled with three other passengers, two women and a man. They were daily labourers working in various plantations in that area.

Gudalur is a hill station surrounded by tea, coffee, and cardamom plantations. It is 50 kilometres away from the famous hill station, Ooty (aka *Udhagamandalam*), in the district of Nilgiris, Tamil Nadu, India. The Golden Cloud Estate was 15 minutes away from the bus station of Gudalur and the auto driver charged me ten rupees. I got down in front of a private check-post of that estate. The main road that I traveled through was quite busy that day. It is a highway that connects two cities – Calicut of Kerala and Mysore of Karnataka. The Mudumalai tiger reserve forest is also at a close distance from there.

The first visible object in the entrance of that estate was a notice board. It stated:

High Court of Madras injunction W.P.No.14817 of 1996 dt. 24<sup>th</sup> February 1999.  
All workers and residents of Alloor and adjacent areas are hereby warned that the area where land has been allotted to them falls within the jurisdiction of the above injunction and is to be protected and safeguarded. Hence rearing of goats,

cattle, sheep etc., is strictly prohibited and is liable for penal action and prosecution – Management.



*Sketch by Guruz*

This content was an open threat to the indigenous communities and others who live inside the estate. Few days later, when I cross-checked with the original judgment of that Writ Petition (*Silver Cloud Estate Vs The Principal Chief Conservator of Forests and Others*, HC, Chennai, W.P.NO. 14817/96 & W.M.P.NO. 20289/96, 02 February 1999), I realized that the message on that board was wrong, manipulated, and the discourse had been generated to instill fear among the indigenous communities.



*Sketch by Venkat*

On that day, there were two watchmen at the check-post. I was permitted inside after a brief interrogation. I led them to believe that I was a scholar of botany and was visiting there to study the herbal plants of the Betta Kurumbas (Betta means forest in Kurumba's language). Anand, my contact person from the Betta Kurumbas, had advised me to share this narrative to the estate personnel if they enquired about my purpose of the visit. Although I have become a familiar face after a couple of visits, they still asked me the same questions every time. I shared my real purpose only with my participants due to the socio-political constraints of the field.

For the last four decades, the plantation land (aka *Janmam* land) of Gudalur had been under legal contestation between various parties (People's Union for Civil Liberties, 2002). Currently, the estate owners had complete control over the land. The owner of the Golden Cloud Estate did not entertain people visiting the hamlets that are located inside the estate. His interests and my purpose were completely at crossroads and the locals were sure that the owner would not allow me if I had to reveal that I was recording the oral histories of Betta Kurumbas in order to help them to retrieve their ancestral land.

Alloor and Koodamoola are two main hamlets located inside the estate that are home to four indigenous communities namely Betta Kurumba, Paniya, Kattunayakan and Irula, alongside a few other forest dwellers like Mandadan Chetti, Naadar, Ceylon repatriates, Christians, and Muslims (Action for Community Organization and Rehabilitation, 2012). The Betta Kurumbas of Koodamoola were the participants of this research. Koodamoola had 72 Betta Kurumba families and five Kattunayakan families.

The rearing of livestock had been one of the traditional occupations of the Kurumba tribe (Logan, 1887, p. 114). Anand had told me that the notice board was erected after a resistance that the Betta Kurumbas took against the estate owner in early 2012. Through various means, the estate owner had been communicating the message of the ban on livestock in the last few years. However, the Betta Kurumbas continued to resist all his moves.



*Sketch by Elan Cheziyan*

This article primarily presents one such resistance that took place between 2012 and 2013. It was not just the estate owner who was trying to suppress the rights of these indigenous people. It includes apparatuses of the State such as revenue, forest and police departments. The estate owner was a powerful person in that locality. In my view, the discourse generated such as the one on the notice board does not happen without a strong socio-political support. The work of Philip (2003, cf. from Morgan, 1884) supports this argument that the combination of power and knowledge of the dominant community had been in play, in this locale, since the British colonization in the mid of nineteenth century. During colonial period, the indigenous people from this locality were uprooted from their traditional land and livelihood and were subsequently reduced to plantation labourers.

The existing intricacies in the field such as intimidation, fake police cases, powerlessness, and the emotional attachment towards the land compelled me and Anand to come-up with a plan to create imaginary plots to narrate the stories of the Betta Kurumbas. Koodamoola is a small hamlet and defending the identity of individuals would be difficult even if I wrote their stories with pseudonyms. I worked closely with civil societies like Adivasi Munnetra Sangham (AMS) and Action for Community Organisation and Rehabilitation (ACCORD) for this research. The participants were in constant fear and also I do not want to risk their livelihood and peace by publishing their stories. During a resistance in the mid-90s, the estate owner and police official filed a fake case against Kethan, a Betta Kurumba leader. He was subjected to severe beating with the rifle butts by the Special Task Force officials in front of his people and was imprisoned for a couple of days. Since then he had been partially paralyzed and lost his agility.

### **Methodology**

The challenge of creating imaginary plots drew me towards review of various ethnographic writings, and Bandelier's (1971) ethnographic novel, *The Delight Makers*, was

the starting point to disentangle this issue. He established an imaginary plot in his work, to narrate the story of Pueblo Indians, keeping the essence of the narratives of the participants alive. Similarly, Denzin and Lincoln's (2000, p. 929) work, *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, enriched my ideas and theoretical base. It introduced me to Creative Analytic Practices and various ways to challenge the dualism of the empiricist. Lastly, as this particular resistance was about issues related to breeding cattle, I decided to character a goat as the protagonist and incorporated the participants' voices. Rani, a she-goat, was a common character that I found in all the narratives of the participants. She was the central character in this resistance. The resistance broke out when an estate watcher was caught by the indigenous people of Koodamoola while abducting her from the cattle shed.

I have followed a postmodern approach and methods are ethnography, oral history and in-depth interview. These methods helped me to understand the everyday resistance of the Betta Kurumbas. The indigenous communities are oral in tradition. The method of oral history came in handy to record their oral history for the last five generations.

I used a checklist for data collection. I stayed in Gudalur for seven months between July 2012 and January 2013 and conducted twelve in-depth interviews. The data collection was carried out during a resistance. I followed the non-participant observation technique. The participants were selected based on snowball sampling technique.

I formulated the research questions based on the literature review and my previous visits to Gudalur district while working with the State. The initial discussions with the ACCORD and the AMS members paved way to select seven favorable hamlets in Gudalur. I selected Koodamoola hamlet after visiting these seven similar indigenous hamlets during my pilot visit in May, 2012. Koodamoola was never short of action as there had always been resistances going on against the estate owners.

In the macro level, there are two main issues pertinent to the indigenous people of this district. Firstly, the estate owners had taken away all the historical rights of these indigenous people, sabotaged their identities, and reduced them to labourers in their ancestral land. Secondly, the State has been avoiding any developmental activities on these indigenous hamlets primarily citing two main reasons, disturbance to the environment and shifting the responsibility to the estate owners.

My intentions while taking up this research were to understand the everyday resistance of these indigenous communities, to record their resistances against the oppressors, and to take their stories to wider audiences. For this research, I received funding from the Dalai Lama Fellows of the United States besides the help extended from my friends who are artists and lawyers. It was part of my pre-doctoral degree at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, India. We made a short documentary film based on the narrative of the Betta Kurumbas (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LuPg1Hm-Q6U>). I have used some of the illustrations from the film in this article.

### **Rani's Confessions**

I knocked at the door of Akram's house and waited for someone to answer.

"Good morning, I am here to meet Rani." I said.

"Rani? There is no one named Rani here and also we are not a Hindu family. You have come to the wrong place," replied Akram.

"I am sure that this is the house to which Ibrahim sold his Rani." I said.

“Do you mean the goat?” he asked.

“Yes,” I replied.

“Why do you want to see that goat? Are you going to buy it?” he asked.

“No, I need to talk to her,” I said, “I mean the goat.”

“What do you mean ‘talk to her’? Are you drunk? How could anyone speak to a goat?”

I could see that he was starting to get angry.

“Please allow me to meet Rani for a few minutes.” I pleaded.

“Don’t you dare call her Rani. It is in the shed and don’t disturb my sleep when you leave.” He said curtly.

“Thanks.” I replied.

I walked on a narrow lane and the shed was visible from the door step. The gutter that ran parallel to the lane reeked foul smell and I had started to get anxious.

“Who is he? This is the first time I see him here. He looks funny and he has to bend so much to enter inside the shed. He must be 6-foot-something. Is he the new fellow who bought me? Is he now going to take me to somewhere else once again?” Rani’s mind was loaded with all these questions when she first saw me.

“My name is Prabhakar and I am a friend of Nony (a kid from Koodamoola and daughter of *Doop* Soman). Currently, I am recording the resistances of Betta Kurumbas.” I introduced myself.

Betta Kurumbas have few common names such as Kethan, Kethy and Bomman. Hence, in order to differentiate one from another, they add adjectives in front of their names based on their character or appearance. In this case, since Soman lies often, he became *Doop* Soman.

“It has been quite a while since I left that hamlet. No one came to meet me, not even Nony, my good friend, in fact, my only friend among the humans. I have known her since her birth. She is eight months younger than me and we basically grew-up together.” Rani reminisced.

“Nony misses you a lot you know? She is trying hard to convince her parents to meet you.” My words broke the silence and brought Rani’s attention.

“Is it so?” Rani seemed to be excited.

“Oh my God, your voice is so funny. I did not believe Nony, when she said that you speak only to a selective few.” I remarked.



“I don’t know how I am audible to this guy, when most others cannot hear me.” Rani thought.

“Are you trying to make fun of me? Tell me, what brings you here?” She was visibly annoyed.

“I am sorry, that’s not my intention,” I said, “tell me about Koodamoola, the family you used to be part of, your relationship with Nony, and how elderly women fought to get you back, when an estate watchman tried abducting you.” I requested.

“Why are you asking me? You should ask the people of Koodamoola. They would be able to explain it to you in detail.” she said.

“I met a few people and gathered some information. However, I want to hear your story in your own words, since you were the one whom people fought for in that incident.” I said.

“I am sure you must know this by now that I was a scapegoat in that incident and the real motive run deeper than that. The estate owner had been trying to ban livestock and push the indigenous communities to entirely depend on him for livelihood.” she shared.

“I remember, when Nony and I were very young, we used to play in the nearby forest and plantations throughout the evening. It used to be the most joyful part of the day. As there were many plants and trees around, it was fun to play hide-and- seek. On occasions, if I didn’t feel like eating at home, I used to have my dinner in the woods which had rich edible vegetation.”

“One day, the estate owner arrived with a couple of estate labourers and marked the area encompassing the region we used to play. We didn’t know that they were planning to fence the entire plantation with electric wires. The estate sprawls over 1000 acres and it is not meant for the estate owner alone. The indigenous communities like Betta Kurumba, Paniya, Irula and Kattunayakan have been living in this land for generations and they have more rights than he has.”

From the literatures and the discussions I had with various key informants, I found that the estate owner had roughly fenced the entire forest plus plantations (which was under his control) with cables connected to electricity in the name of protecting the forest from wood smugglers and the labourers from wild animals. The motive was not to only protect it from smugglers but also to keep the indigenous and other communities under surveillance. The funny thing is that he himself was once caught by the forest department for smuggling woods in 2007. A case was registered against him and it is still in the court (I could not verify the case). What’s even more ironic is that the Betta Kurumba households do not have electricity connections as yet. They pay three rupees to charge their mobile phones in a grocery shop at Alloor.

The estate owner has been using livestock as a means to force the indigenous communities to lay down their traditional occupation (of rearing livestock) and work in his estate full-time since the estate had been facing a labour crisis for the last couple of years.

The powerful forest dwelling communities who live inside the estate took this issue to the media with all the evidence stating that the estate owner was misquoting the court's ruling and intimidating the people. But sadly, no newspaper was ready to attract the wrath of the estate owner, barring a Malayalam daily. In continuation, the local news agent of that daily received threatening phone calls.

Before moving on to the difficult questions, I asked, "Rani, were you with the Beeman's family since your birth?"

"No I was not." She said.

"I was raised by Ibrahim of Alloor hamlet until I was five months old. Then he leased me to Beeman, a Betta Kurumba, with an agreement that my first kid will be the fee for nurturing me and the second kid and the kids thereafter shall belong to Ibrahim."

"I was named Rani after coming to Beeman's house. That was my first time of having been shown any kind of love and affection in life. I was not confined or locked up in some dirty shed like I am here. Initially I used to be tied only at night. I lived freely in the hamlet, could walk into anybody's house and would get cuddled by children."

"However, after they have put up the electric fence and the ban on livestock, Beeman started to tie me in the shed more often than not. They took us for grazing in the nearby field once in a day. The families started protecting us from potential threats that prevailed around."

Her face sunk in.

I asked, "Do you remember any conflicts between the estate owner and the indigenous people over livestock, apart from the one that you were involved?"

"Yes, I do remember one. My friend, Tholi (another she-goat), living at Mathy's house was targeted since Mathy's daughter, an ex-ward counsellor, had been giving the estate owner a tough time."

She then added, "The estate owner was harassing Mathy's family for nurturing Tholi and didn't allow Mathy's family members – her two sons and two daughters-in-laws – to work in the estate. Eventually, Tholi had to be sold like me."

"I am sorry. It is sad to hear about the loss of your friend. It must have been hard on you." I said.

She paused for a while and said, "I am happy that you came to meet me. I was waiting for someone to talk to as I was all alone. Except Nony, no one hears me, now I have one more person to share my feelings with."

"Will you do me a favour?" She asked.

“Sure.” I said.

“I have a message to Beeman and his family. Will you convey it?” she requested.

“I will,” I promised.

“I want to apologise. It is because of me that they were exiled from the hamlet and are living like refugees at Kamaraj Nagar (another hamlet).” She said.

“Don’t worry about it; it was not your fault.” I consoled her.

“If you don’t mind, can you recollect the events from that day?” I asked reluctantly.

“It was a day that should not have seen the light. Everything around me crumbled like a house of cards.” She grieved.

“The day started with some assurance of resonance in the lives of the Betta Kurumbas of Koodamoola since a judge from the High Court of Madras was visiting the hamlet. The indigenous people were full of hope because they felt that there are people in the mainland who are concerned about the miseries and the grievances of indigenous people.”

“The visit called for a congregation. Many indigenous families attended the meeting and shared their agonies such as how their kitchen gardens were vandalised by the estate owner, about the ban on livestock, poverty, lack of electricity, prohibition of infrastructural activities under guise of the Section 17 (of Janmam Estates Act), and poor water and sanitation facilities. The judge was deeply moved and assured the indigenous people of his full-fledged support.”

She then added, “I didn’t know, that the climate was unfolding slowly for the worst situation. The estate owner, meanwhile, had spies placed in the meeting. Soon after the meeting with the judge, Betta Kurumbas had a community gathering to discuss and decide on the next course of action. The meeting hall and my house were on the two extreme sides of the hamlet.”

When I enquired about the implication of this visit made by the judge of high court, the locals shared that all the judge did was reprimand a few government officials for the deplorable conditions of the hamlet and wrote a few letters to some government departments for investigation and subsequent improvements. But nothing really changed in the hamlet and the conditions remain the same.

Suddenly Rani became nervous and continued, “On that day, the area around my house was empty and the air was dense with cool breeze. Lalitha *amma* (*amma* means mother in Tamil language) and I were alone. Like every other day, she released me from my shed by 12:30 p.m. and took me to a nearby jack fruit tree for grazing. I had grass and some neem leaves.”

“Lalitha *amma* left the home to fetch drinking water. Immediately after, I heard a voice in the vicinity. I heard someone talking on their mobile phone about the meeting and the movement of people. The person on the other side assured him that the meeting will continue for some more time.”

“He then started rushing towards me. I had seen him before. He was Damodaran, a non-indigenous person, from Alloor who works as a watcher in the estate. I was terrified and started shouting out loud. I did not understand why he had to do this to me? My heart was beating fast and soon a sort of panic took over me.”

“Initially, he too seemed to be nervous and struggled to remove the knot of the rope to which I was tied. I gave him three blows in his thigh but that didn’t hurt him much. My cries were not loud enough, to attract the attention of the people and we fought for some time. He soon untied the knot and dragged me along the muddy path. He was abducting me. Luckily, at that very moment, Lalitha *amma* returned to the house with her water pot. As soon as she caught sight of us, she rushed towards me dropping the earthen pot on the ground.”



*Sketch by Guruz*

Rani could not control the stream of tears that trickled down her cheeks.

She added, “It is then that I felt affection of a mother for the first time. She was delirious. She shouted at Damodaran and asked him to leave me alone. But that monster of a man did not heed her call and pushed her aside with brute force. Having been knocked down, she started shouting for help. Nony came out of the hut and to her utter shock found Lalitha *amma* lying on the ground. *Amma*’s left elbow was hurt and bleeding. *Amma* instructed Nony to run to the meeting hall and call for help. Nony scurried away.”

“I had never seen Nony run as fast as that. I had always won the friendly races between us. It made me realize what I meant to her. She left the bleeding Lalitha *amma* unattended to fetch people for my rescue. Meanwhile, I was fastened to a bike, with all my limbs tied up. When the bike was about to start, people had rushed in around the bike and had taken the key.”

“I admire the elder women of Betta Kurumba tribe.” She continued. “They are bold and fearless. They surrounded Damodaran and demanded an explanation. Also, they asked the Betta Kurumba men to keep away from the crowd that gathered around Damodaran as it might lead to a criminal case.”

Since the atrocities of the Special Task Force on Kethan, which I told you about, the elderly women had begun to lead the resistances. They believed that women would not be subjected to the same ordeals by the police as men would. I found similar conduct in other Betta Kurumba hamlets during my fieldwork.



*Sketch by Elan Cheziyan*

“Damodaran told the crowd that he was taking me away because I was grazing the plants which were inside the plantation. However, no one bought his argument since the plantation was far away from my house. There were many voices shouting and yelling at him. I was about to faint. A few minutes of breathing space helped me to regain my consciousness. Meanwhile, the message had reached the estate owner that Damodaran and his bike were under siege. Likewise, Betta Kurumbas were also calling out to their well-wishers for support.”

“The estate owner had called the local sub-inspector of police for assistance. An hour and half later, the sub-inspector, a woman police, arrived at the scene in the estate’s vehicle. The locals then directed their attention towards her and scoffed at her for acting as an agent of the estate owner. They ridiculed her asking why the government had not supplied diesel to her government vehicle.”

I heard from reliable sources that the government officials in Gudalur were receiving bribe from the estate owners on a monthly basis. Besides the bribe, the estate owner of the Golden Cloud Estate gifts 25 litres of diesel to the police department every month. It is a kind of nexus that exist between the apparatuses of the State and the capitalists to safeguard each other's interests.

I have been standing for so long since the start of my conversation with Rani that my legs were starting to tire. I sat on the floor. Rani came forward and stood next to me.

She continued, "When the crowd got out of control, the sub-inspector called the circle inspector for help. Few minutes later, the circle inspector arrived with a group of police officials as if they had come to control a riot. The circle inspector asked the Betta Kurumbas and the estate people to calm down. He assured the Betta Kurumbas that a First Information Report (FIR) would be registered in a day. He then released Damodaran and the bike late in the evening and asked the community leaders to meet him the next day with a petition."

On the next day, I heard that two groups, one from Koodamoola and another from the Adivasi Munnetra Sangham (AMS), went to file complaints. The AMS representatives were treated disrespectfully, threatened, and warned of dire consequences if they further intervened in this case. The petition of the local indigenous people was accepted but FIR was not registered. There were five Betta Kurumbas who signed that petition.

Unexpectedly, within three days, the petition filed was withdrawn, without any communication to other community members. The estate owner appointed Ibrahim to broker a settlement with those who filed the petition.

"I don't know much about what happened after," Rani continued. "Ibrahim took me back and sold me to Akram. The estate owner with his money and political power could buy anyone. I am not sure whether Bomman had been bought or intimidated. However, I am sure that he did not have it in him to take a stand against the estate owner."

"When I was about to leave that village, I heard from someone, a section within Koodamoola was still on strike refusing to work for the estate. Only the individuals, who had withdrawn the complaint, had gone back to work for the estate."

"It was a good sign, actually. Despite so many limitations and differences among them, they never stopped fighting. I firmly believe that someday these people will reclaim their lost land."

She went silent all of a sudden and her eyes were wide open. I was little confused at first and heard, "*Dai, Thambi ... Dai, Thambi*," (means hello, younger brother in Tamil language) Akram was calling me from his door step.

"It is more than half an hour. What the hell are you still doing with that goat?" He went on yelling at me.

"Shall I buy you? Would you like to come with me?" I asked Rani.

“No, I don’t want to go anywhere. Just pass the message on to Bomman’s family and convey my regards to Nony. I think this is where my story ends.”

### **Further Analysis**

Rani’s narrative was only her own version of events and to my knowledge there were about six other known versions to this resistance. This section will unravel those narrations by various factions such as Bomman; temporary employees, who were still in resistance; temporary employees, who went back to work in the estate; permanent employees, who went back to work in the estate; permanent employees, who were in resistance; and Kannan. Though the major discourse was similar, there are quite a few additions or negations in the narrations of each of these factions. The trust that I built during the fieldwork helped me to get to know these various facets. Initially, they did not reveal any of these differences that exist within their community. Likewise, the narratives of these differences were only available in the form of gossips and backbiting. These people remain concerned for an open talk in front of various people.

#### **Beeman (His Well-Wisher’s Account)**

He and his family members left the hamlet (Koodamoola) like refugees, soon after that incident. Word around the hamlet was that he was not picking his phone if any one tried to communicate from Koodamoola.

He was not part of the group that submitted petition to the police officials, though he was one of the main parties involved in this case. Ibrahim helped the estate owner to establish a deal with him. There was an exchange of money about Rs. 10,000.

He is poor and lives in a mud house. He can’t spend money in legal cases against the powerful estate owner. He has a family to look after and he is the only breadwinner in his family. Hence, he succumbed and did not go against the interest of the estate owner.

#### **Temporary Employees – Who Were Still in Resistances**

Within this section, there were two sub-groups – youth and elderly. The elderly had issues with all the other factions of this hamlet but they did not confront their opposition directly. Their discourse vastly existed in hearsay and lamentation. While probing the reasons for this indirect confrontation, it was found that they were once supporters of this estate owner and some were even bought by this owner in the past resistances. Hence, everyone within this section lacked moral right to question the others.

The young men within this section were able to manage their livelihood somehow by working in the nearby estates, nurseries, and shops. Also, the mobility was not an issue to them unlike the elderly people. Beemen was also of their age and they look at him as a traitor. They had been vocal and were active in taking various steps to reclaim their ancestral land.

#### **Temporary Employees – Who Went Back to Work in the Estate**

It was said that soon after the confrontation with the estate watchers of the Golden Cloud Estate, all the Betta Kurumba families, except Kannan, collectively signed an agreement that they won’t work in the estate anymore.

The first group (5 members) who broke this agreement was the one that filed the police complaint against the estate owner. Ibrahim, again, helped the estate owner to arrange an

amicable settlement with the group. They withdrew the complaint by receiving a modest amount of Rs. 5,000 each from the estate owner and started working for him again.

The next group that broke the agreement was families with young children to look after. They found it extremely difficult to work outside the estate since they hardly get any time to care for their children. The estate owner demanded and received an apology letter from this group before reinstating them.

Lastly, a section of elderly people living in extreme poverty went back to work since they lacked energy and opportunities besides the poor transportation facilities and also the odd work timings. Koodamoola is six kilometres from Gudalur town and it takes a kilometre's walk to reach the bus stop.

### **Permanent Employee – Who Went Back to Work in Estate**

Of the four permanent employees of this hamlet, one went back to work in the estate, soon after the resistance, since he was the sole breadwinner of his family. Also he did not have any other income like the other three permanent employees, who were persisting with the resistance.

### **Permanent Employees – Who Were in Resistance**

It is an interesting scenario that of the three permanent employees, who were in resistance, two of them are husband and wife. They are elderly and about to retire in another few years.

A union leader (from outside) lent support to all these three employees and mediated by Madhavan, the son-in-law of the said couple. They have approached this union leader after hearing the news that he had helped an employee of another estate and obtained a compensation of Rs. 200,000 in a strike. I heard that they have registered a case against the estate owner in the labour court but Madhavan was not able to say on what clause.

Meanwhile, with the help of the union leader, Madhavan had registered a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO). It was a membership based agency and they collect a membership fee of Rs. 25 every week. Mostly, they work as mediators or brokers between the government officials and the indigenous people. I heard from a participant that a section within indigenous people did not trust Madhavan since he was not transparent in sharing the expenditures and he does not know to read and write. Another interesting fact is that Madhavan once worked as a personal assistant to the estate owner. He worked for him for about five years and left the job after an altercation with the owner.

### **Kannan (His Well-Wisher's Account)**

He did not participate in the resistance. He worked like an agent for the estate owner. He was given a promotion by the estate owner, from labourer to watcher, few months before the resistance. Many of the labourers of the estate aspire to become a watcher or a supervisor. It has become a kind of status symbol among them. The workload is also comparatively less if they become a watcher or a supervisor compared to a labourer. He did not wish to put his new job at stake by joining the resistance. He also received monetary benefits from the owner for the information that he provides once in a while.



## Theoretical Discussion

It is evident that the Betta Kurumbas of Koodamoola were not a homogenous community. They were divided like any other community due to various reasons such as size of the landholdings, clan rivalry, gender differences, designations, wealth, ideology, age and perspectives. These differences play a major role while confronting threats both from internal and external sources. The narratives of the participants clearly reject dualism, cross the typical boundaries of right and wrong, and refuse a grand chronicle. This condition plainly correlates with Agger's (1991, p. 113) idea of postmodernism; it rejects grand narratives, dualistic ideas, and believes in multiple realities. For example, in this resistance, Kannan was not part of the struggle, right from the beginning, and he was very much with the estate owner and acted against his fellow indigenous people. If this thread of story had to end here, he would be framed as a traitor just as some of other factions believe so. The contextual analysis of his actions, through his well-wishers, manifested presence of multiple layers of realities. He was recently promoted to a sentinel from a labourer. He does not want to lose his new job, increased salary and comfortable living by confronting the estate owner.

## Everyday Resistance

The work of James C. Scott (1987), *Weapons of the Weak*, was revolutionary in the scholarship of resistance studies. His primary argument was that to understand peasant rebellions, we should first get to know the values of the peasant system and how it is associated with their livelihood. He explored the simple everyday resistance of the peasants of Burma and Vietnam, such as gossip, falsehood, and stealing. He argued that an open revolt is a rare phenomenon among them.

Likewise, we can draw many such parallels with our subjects: the Betta Kurumbas. Their land and livelihood had been under colonisation for over a century now. They did not have the power or the resource to organise an open revolt against the powerful nexus of the capitalists and the apparatuses of the State. All they had been doing was negotiating the oppression of the dominant society through simple everyday resistance such as the one discussed in this article. The forms of resistances were novel and oblique to most standard forms of resistance. For example, some of the everyday resistances include deception, gossip, lamentation, ignoring the orders of the estate owner, acting as double agents, extending invitation to honest bureaucrats and judges for discussions and pushing their proposals in local bodies. Without context in which they have been living for decades and the kind of hurdles they face, it is tough to understand these simple everyday resistances.

On the other hand, it has also given opportunity for a layer of the community members to progress from mere labourers to watchers and supervisors besides receiving perks on occasions. For example, Beeman was quite aware of his strengths, and instead of locking horns with the estate owner, he took money and left the village silently for a couple of months. During my fieldwork, I noticed at times, clan rivalry was also a factor in taking sides. For instance, during the Kethan incident, two clans went and supported the estate owner and only a section within the community stood by his side. The heads of those two clans of course were promoted to supervisor positions in the estate.

On occasions, the internal politics and the difference arising from within had been very detrimental to the development of the community. Few years ago, a group was trying hard to bring electricity connections to the houses of Koodamoola. They had approached many government officials and local politicians with their petitions. After months of struggle, they were able to pass the files from one desk to another after convincing the authorities of their eligibility to get the electricity connections. When the proposal was about to sanction, another

faction backed by the estate owner filed a petition saying that electricity connections to their hamlet is against their traditional values. The authorities of course accepted the arguments of the latter faction.

Nonetheless, it is also true that at times some factions have shown resilience to overpower the others including the estate owner in order to get what they want. To change the power equation within Koodamoola, the civil societies engineered a project in which the AMS has brought in a residential lawyer to strengthen the movement of the indigenous communities. The youth from Koodamoola along with the lawyer were able to remove the check post and the display board by the end of my fieldwork. It was so unlike of the estate owner that no case was filed this time against the indigenous people. It was probably due to the fact that a change in power structure was becoming apparent.

It is also important to highlight here that the estate owner knows his limits and cannot go beyond a point where he can take advantage of apparatuses of the State – police, revenue and forest officials, on a daily basis. Whenever there is some turbulence in their relations does manifest in some form like the case registered against the estate owner in 2007 for smuggling woods.

### **Capitalists and Apparatuses of the State**

Another interesting scenario that emerges here is the solidarity among the pillars of the democracy – legislative, judiciary, executive, and media, towards the capitalists and against the proletariat. As is the case throughout the country, the apparatuses of the State support the interests of the capitalists and the other dominant communities. The current prison statistics on undertrials and the status of implementation of the Forest Rights Act, 2006, are the two examples that could suit this article.

Harsh Mander, the Director of the Centre for Equity Studies, says, “The disproportionate presence of members of the Dalits (the earlier untouchables), and Scheduled Tribes (or indigenous people) and Muslims among undertrials, points not simply to a technical breakdown but also to the increased vulnerability of these groups, and probably bias.” He made this observation based on the prison statistics of India in 2013 (Rukmini, 2014).

Similarly, in 2010, the Council for Social Development submitted a report on the status of implementation of the Forest Rights Act, 2006. This act is one of the progressive legislations to correct the historical injustice committed against the indigenous communities of India. However, the report highlighted that most of the key features of the legislation had been sabotaged by the members of the executive and the legislative in the implementation process (Bijoy, 2010, p. 15).

### **Conclusion**

The everyday resistances of Betta Kurumbas to continue their traditional livelihood are part of a broader stroke of access to autonomy and retrieval of their ancestral land colonised by the dominant societies of both pre and postcolonial States. Their political consciousness and oral histories clearly reveal that their ancestral land had been colonised by this plantation.

The other indigenous communities such as Kattunayakan, Irula, and Paniya who also live in that area had never confronted the estate owner and the Mandadan Chetti (small farmers / forest dwellers). They have perhaps come to terms with themselves that it was their destiny to be the labourers in the estate for life. Their populace was also less, histories different, and they did not practice small scale farming like Betta Kurumbas. This situation makes the case of Betta Kurumbas unique and cannot be clubbed with other communities including Mandadan Chetti. However, it is also impossible to understand the case of Betta Kurumbas ignoring the

other communities completely. They lend support to various factions within Betta Kurumbas and the estate owner based on their individual and community interests.

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