

Commodification, Conservation and  
Community: An Analysis and a Case Study in  
South India.

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# Contents

Acknowledgements ii

List of Tables and Figures iii

Synopsis iv

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION: COMMODIFICATION, CONSERVATION AND COMMUNITY 5

Chapter 2

COMMODIFICATION: UNDERPINNING DEVELOPMENT-LED CONSERVATION 9

A. Aspects of the Recent Anthropological Debate 9

i. *Money and the Morality of Exchange* 10

ii. *The Social Life of Things* 14

B. Commodification: A Theoretical Outline 17

Chapter 3

CASE STUDY - THE SETTING 26

A. Methodology 26

B. Biogeography of the Nilgiri Hills 27

C. Ethnographic Background 29

i. Alu Kurumba 30

ii. Irula 35

D. Socio-Cultural Changes 37

E. Semmenarai and Keystone 41

Chapter 4

MOTIVATIONAL RESPONSES TO THE EXTENSION OF COMMODITY RELATIONS  
IN SEMMENARAI 45

A. Something for Nothing: Tribal Difficulties with Money 45

B. Embracing 'Commodity-Wealth' 53

i. Why the Attraction? 53

ii. Commodification and Freedom 59

Chapter 5

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS 66

Bibliography 70

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## List of Tables and Figures

- Figure 3.1.  
Nilgiri Hills, Tamil Nadu State, South India 28
- Table 3.1  
Main features of the Irula and Kurumba economy, 50-60 years ago and presently 36
- Table 3.2  
Population changes in the Nilgiris from 1871 – 1981 38
- Table 3.3  
Comparative returns for selected tribal commodities 44

## Synopsis

This work illustrates the relevance of an understanding of commodification to development-oriented conservation policy and examines, from this perspective, the social consequences of employing financial incentives to secure 'local' participation on conservation programmes. To this end, the work reviews features of the contemporary anthropological debate on commodification, providing where needed a more thorough-going exposition of its nature and implications, before applying this analysis, in the case study, to a South Indian 'tribal' community's recent involvement in an ecodevelopment programme. Focusing on motivational features for the community's involvement, the case study reveals a changing understanding of 'wealth' and brings to light the social consequences of this for the community in a manner commonly neglected by current conservation policy. In view of these consequences, the work argues against the general use of financial incentives for communities in transition between subsistence and commodity-based practices and concludes with recommendations for the ecodevelopment programme in question and for development-led, community-based conservation policy in general.

# 1

## INTRODUCTION: COMMODIFICATION, CONSERVATION AND COMMUNITY

The chief assumption of this study is that one cannot fully understand the problems of conservation and development without understanding the context in which conservation and development operate. If the predominant feature of that context be commodification, then as conservationists or developers we ignore it at the expense of ignoring the rationale that underpins our enterprise. It is for this reason that a substantial, and unfortunately, difficult part of this study is devoted to illustrating the relevance of an understanding of commodification to development-oriented conservation policy. On the basis of this understanding, we will be better able to grasp the logic that considers development, which in large part gave rise to the need for conservation, to now provide its way forward.<sup>1</sup> We may also, on this basis, reconsider the wisdom of the recent trend to secure with the provision of financial incentives the participation of local communities in wild resource<sup>2</sup> conservation<sup>3</sup> (McNeely *et al.* 1990; Wells and Brandon, 1992; Gadgil and Guha, 1992; IIED, 1994). It is an examination of the social consequences of this policy with which the remaining part of the study is concerned.

Whether it be sporadic local involvement or full community-based conservation projects, the success of conservation in ‘developing’ countries is often seen to lie in some form of partnership with local people. Key to the promotion of conservation in this manner has been the provision of financial incentives to local people: the more community members perceive their wealth to depend on the sustainable use and/or protection of wild resources, it

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<sup>1</sup> On the increasing alignment of conservation objectives with economic imperatives, frequently formulated as ‘sustainable development’ see for example McNeely, 1988; Kux, 1991; Anon, 1992; Gilmour, 1995.

<sup>2</sup> The term ‘wild resource’ is taken to cover undomesticated and uncultivated flora and fauna (see for example Eaton and Sarch, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> The provision of financial incentives ranges from full community involvement in the planning, protection and sustainable use of endangered species (e.g. CAMPFIRE in Zimbabwe) to the redirection of local peoples’ wild resource-dependent livelihoods, from alternate income generating activities such as eco-tourism (see, for example, World Wild Fund for Nature’s (WWF) Integrated Conservation and Development Projects in Larson *et al.*, 1998) to the sustainable harvesting and marketing of minor forest produce (e.g. Cultural Survival Enterprises cf. Clay, 1991 and Schwartzmann in Snyder, 1998, 11, Conservation International Enterprises, Biodiversity Conservation Network enterprises, cf. ATREE, 1999.). See also Milner-Gulland and Mace, 1998, 155-159 for an overview.

is thought, the more conservation is likely to succeed. This assumption has recently been challenged (cf. Milner-Gulland and Mace, 1998) on the basis that the more one kind of wealth, specifically monetary wealth, depends upon the sustainable use or conservation of wild resources, the more people want to increase it. As a consequence, the more dependent this wealth is on such resources, the more they may, in general, be exploited to satisfy growing 'needs'. Only in a few cases in 'developing' countries where local people were compensated for the loss of traditional livelihoods by the provision of alternative means of income generation were conservation efforts deemed successful (see for example, Leach, 1994; Inamdar and Cobb, 1998; Larson *et al.*, 1998) and these, almost invariably where communities were already familiar with the cash economy. Whether or not this approach proves adequate for the attainment of conservation objectives in general remains to be seen, although evidence against it is mounting (Wells, 1995).

In contrast, comparatively little consideration has been given to the impacts of financial incentives on local communities.<sup>4</sup> This is disconcerting since it is quite possible that financial incentives could promote conservation but at the same time prove fragmentary to the community. Indeed, recent studies confirm earlier suspicions that conversion to mainstream economic practices, that is, of establishing commodity relations, may lead communities, particularly those unfamiliar with a cash economy, to rapid breakdown (Bourdieu, 1979; Taussig, 1980; Colchester, 1994). For others, the new-found attractiveness of monetary gain may induce a return to trading endangered but lucrative wild resources (TRAFFIC, 1994; Oats, 1995; Milliken, 1997; Milner-Gulland and Mace, 1998, 39-40; Hoover, 1999). More consideration needs to be given to the social consequences of integrating vernacular communities into the mainstream economy.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> IIED (1994, 1995) provide early cursory accounts.

<sup>5</sup> The characterisation of a community or a people as vernacular is, like the term indigenous, quite problematic. Initially used as a euphemism for 'native' (Williams, 1983, 215), indigenous, when used by 'non-indigenous' people suggesting subsistence, pre-capitalist, semi-industrialised or simply the 'preceding' people of a place, is considered by some to betray pejoratively essentialist distinctions. Partly for these reasons, the term vernacular, with connotations of a contingent *state* rather than inherent *quality* of a society or people is preferred to indigenous in this study. Using contingent states of affairs rather than essential qualities as investigative criteria is also important for reasons of praxis: a community or society once deemed 'vernacular' can always 'return' to a subsistence mode of production (see Illich, 1978, 93-5 on 'modern subsistence'), whereas for peoples designated as 'indigenous' who become 'modernised' or 'Westernised', there is generally no turning back.

The current debate on the impacts of commodification on vernacular communities has seen a split into (at least) two main camps. On the one hand are those who highlight the destructive and disembedding effects of commodity relations on local communities and their culture (Polanyi, 1971; Illich, 1978; Wolf, 1982; Giddens, 1990; Hornborg, 1998). On the other, are those who playdown such effects by highlighting what could be described as the resilience of indigenous culture to foreign economic practices (Bloch and Parry, 1989), and those who point to the positive, freedom-creating benefits that formal economic relations can bring (Hayek, 1944; Nozick, 1974).

To a large extent, the debate remains hampered by a lack of consensus as to what impacts count as beneficial and what count as deleterious. The fact, for instance, that market exchange and monetisation, have in many cases lead to new individual freedoms, especially for women, enabling release from tradition-encrusted power relations, is not to say that the local community and existing social order have themselves always survived intact. In fact, economically-driven individualism has frequently been seen to play a decisive role in the fragmentation and polarisation of countless communities (Taylor, 1991). In reply, some have argued that community change does not necessarily mean cultural change (Weiss, 1996, 8) and, furthermore, that there is nothing inherently anti-cultural in the commodity-based practices of capitalism (Bloch and Parry, 1989, 3).

It is contended that an essential component to understanding the impacts of commodification on a vernacular community, to appreciate its disembedding forces and freedom-creating features, lies not only in examining what forces generate social change but equally why such communities embrace agents of change. Consequently, the focus of the case study shall concern the possible reasons why members of a ‘vernacular’ community become involved in wage-labour, money and the sale and purchase of commodities – items usually considered the ‘agents of change’. What these may mean to them and what implications their acquisition may have for the community’s way of life will receive primary attention. This motivational inquiry compliments that into the nature of commodification and its general implications.

In the following chapter I examine ‘commodification’ in order to illustrate its relevance to current development-oriented conservation policy, beginning firstly with recent

anthropological literature on the subject. Chapters Three and Four constitute the case study: a south Indian tribal community in transition from subsistence to commodity-orientated economic practice, and one that has recently become the focus of an ecodevelopment project. Motivational responses to the extension of commodity relations are discussed and analysed in Chapter Four with a view to providing practical suggestions for the ecodevelopment project in question and recommendations for community-based conservation policy in general (Chapter Five).

## 2

### COMMODIFICATION:

### UNDERPINNING DEVELOPMENT-LED CONSERVATION

#### Aspects of the Recent Anthropological Debate

It would be useful to examine commodification and its alleged disrupting features antithetically; that is, with literature which calls these features into question. Among the more influential in recent times, two works stand out: Bloch and Parry's *Money and the Morality of Exchange* (1989) and Appadurai's *The Social Life of Things* (1986). While Appadurai's work widens Marx's definition of the commodity in a manner he considers both to enlarge Marx's remit and to highlight areas for improvement within the orthodox framework, Bloch and Parry's project is somewhat more extreme. They see as overstated the deleterious influence of commodity relations on individuals and their cultural life. The implications of Bloch and Parry's work is clear: if they are right, there is little to worry about and development-oriented conservation can proceed as usual. Appadurai's argument, for reasons of his definition of the commodity, has similar implications.

In the process of reviewing these positions, it shall be argued that while both present strong cases, both have serious flaws: Bloch and Parry's chiefly because their subjectivist foundation limits the efficacy of their criticisms against objectivist positions, and Appadurai's, because his definition of the commodity eliminates the practical, emancipatory content found in Marx's definition. The relevance of these arguments to development-led conservation is clear when it is understood that the latter follows from the same assumption made by the former, namely, that commodification is not an issue. With 'development' being the way conservation should proceed, an understanding of commodification is as much neglected there as its import is rejected (in a qualified form) by the anthropologists. What justification their arguments provide to development-led conservation in support of

this eschewal will be critically reviewed before proceeding to a more thorough account of the nature of commodification.

(i) Money and the Morality of Exchange

In *Money and the Morality of Exchange*, Bloch and Parry argue that the widespread hostility toward money displayed by such ‘objectivist’ theorists as Marx, Aristotle and to a lesser extent Simmel, derives from the belief that money is “an incredibly powerful agent of profound social and cultural transformation... credited with an *intrinsic* power to revolutionise society and culture” (Bloch and Parry, 1989, 5). This revolutionary power of money is thought to invariably homogenise diverse cultural perspectives into “a particular worldview (ibid., 17),... inexorably subvert the moral economy of ‘traditional’ societies” (ibid., 12) and encourage an attitude of “explicit, relentless, egotistical calculation” (ibid., 17). This condemnation of money, Bloch and Parry claim, is largely a reflection of their own cultural bias. For it “fails to give due weight to the *cultural template* (ibid., 19)..., [to] culturally constructed notions of production, consumption, circulation and exchange... In order to understand the way in which money is used,” they argue, “it is vitally important to understand the *cultural matrix* into which it is incorporated” (ibid., 1, italics added).

Arguing instead for a subjectivist re-evaluation of the significance of money,<sup>6</sup> Bloch and Parry draw attention to a number of vernacular societies seemingly conversant with money and money-orientated practices yet who appear to have retained their culture, sense of community and identity; examples which, they consider, undermine claims as to the disembedding power of money. Exhibiting little if any of the features Marx, Aristotle and Simmel allegedly ascribe to communities using money, we find that in Fiji, for example, money is regarded as unclean, the general use of which is perceived to be a threat to the

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<sup>6</sup> Subjectivism is taken in an epistemological rather than ethical sense. Frequently confused with epistemological relativism (the view that what is true depends on changing conditions) and occasionally identified as the belief that what is perceived exists only when and because it is perceived (subjective idealism), subjectivism refers to the primacy of persons’ experience as the basis for assessing truth claims. A view is subjectivist for instance, if it maintains that the truth of some class of statements depends on the mental state or experience of the person making the statement.

ordered moral world of chiefs and kinship. Money becomes incorporated into their existing economic practice only by means of purification or 'drinking cash' (Toren, 1989). Equally, in Benares, India, observations that monetary practices seem to be readily accommodated by pre-existing mentalities of purity and pollution without altering them (Bayley in Bloch and Parry, 1989, 21) are used to counter claims that, in spite of the perception of money as a threat, it may be incorporated or 'domesticated' without in any way homogenising worldviews. In addition, money is frequently met with local resistance, for example by Sinhalese fishermen of Sri Lanka who, because women are the traditional custodians of traded tokens, consider it capable of further undermining their status (Stirrat, 1989); and by Shona spirit mediums of Zimbabwe who, it is argued, consider it and the European goods it can buy to be incompatible with the sacred domain of ancestral authority (Lan, 1989). On the basis of these and similar examples, Bloch and Parry conclude that the claim that money disrupts cultures and homogenises worldviews when incorporated into local economic practice is misguided. If correct, it would simply not be possible to generalise the impacts of commodification with regard development-led conservation initiatives since localised 'cultural templates' are primary in determining whether these initiatives 'subvert the moral economy'.

The first problem with Bloch and Parry's argument is that it appears to be a straw-man argument. Marx, for instance, is assigned a condemnation of money which, in this unqualified presentation, he did not make. On the basis of this misreading, 'Marx's' argument is considered to be undermined by the provision of counter-examples. It is not money alone that Marx claimed to be revolutionary; it is what money represents in capitalism: a mediation between wage-labour, private property and exchange. As a mediation - an activity that sustains a position by negating its opposite (Meszaros, 1970, 160) - money sustains private property and wage-labour by negating collective property and free, uncoerced labour. But without the context of the social relations which create private property and wage labour, money has little disrupting significance, at least according to Marx. As a consequence, Bloch and Parry's arguments against Marx's 'condemnation' of money are hollow.

A further problem with Bloch and Parry's argument turns on the focus on money as a 'thing', rather than acknowledge that money within capitalist practice is also a relationship.<sup>7</sup> Their reluctance to conceptualise money as a relationship would seem to derive from their mistrust of an objectivist perspective. But it is this perspective which makes possible the conceptualisation of money as a relationship between people and things in addition to what it may (symbolically) mean to those people. To illustrate, when an object becomes a commodity, its price signifies its relationship to other commodities (a quantitative one). What this and the object the price represents may mean to people of course constitutes a valid line of inquiry. But its price also signifies a relationship between people - property owners and propertyless labourers - and between people and things (living wage-labour and capital), relationships that only occur in a specific mode of production. The point to consider here is that this relationship and an analysis thereof hold irrespective of whether people are conscious of being shaped by it.<sup>8</sup> It is not unreasonable to suppose that this mode of production could become the ordering principle of social organisation quite independent of people's awareness of this and regardless of whether or not they have much understanding of the role of its tokens in facilitating this organisation. Indeed, even in 'heavily-commodified' Western societies, it is rare for people to view commodities and money as agents which facilitate the constant re-organisation of their social lives quite independent of their control (see Lukács (1971 [1923]) or Lodziak (1995) on ideology).

Recognising that it is not money as such, but what money, within capitalist relations, represents that is the problem is something to which Bloch and Parry could possibly consent, but only at the cost of expanding their subjectivist perspective to include an objectivist one. But this would mean that we are no longer dealing with money alone but with commodification. And it was commodification with which such theorists as Marx were dealing all along. The homogenisation of worldviews that money is supposed to engender is not a consequence of monetisation as Bloch and Parry claim - one need only compare the worldviews of the monetised societies of ancient Rome, Phoenicia or China (cf. Marx, 1961, 124) with our own. Rather, it is a consequence of universalising a mode of production.

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<sup>7</sup> In a similar way, by focusing on the 'standard of living' of a community or people, development tends to isolate the means of increasing this, income generation, from its context, thereby objectifying or making an object out of what may also be relationship (see below).

<sup>8</sup> This is of course the domain of the critique of ideology.

Confounding money with commodification places Bloch and Parry's conclusions in doubt. The first they draw, is that the integration of money into a vernacular society without altering it indicates that the destructive power commonly assigned to money is overestimated. Instead this could indicate that the role of money in generalising commodity relations has not been understood by its users. But even if it is understood, commodification itself remains unquestioned, since, as has been argued, the influence of money alone is not the same as that of commodification.

The second conclusion is that local resistance to money (and commodities) weakens the claim that money has an 'intrinsic power to revolutionise society and culture'. Resistance to capitalism's attempt to revolutionise society, that is, to re-organise social life around the principle of private property, does not necessarily undermine the capitalist dynamic. On the contrary, it testifies to the nature of its development. It is a mistake to view capitalist development as unidirectional. Like other developmental trends Giddens reminds us, capitalist development has dialectical features (1990, 19) which generate opposition to itself and to which it then finds ways of overcoming. One example of this can be seen in the extensive opposition to Western goods by Hawaiian chiefs in the late eighteenth century. The chiefs felt threatened by the newcomers and in keeping with their cosmopolitical interests, placed Western goods under taboo. This could be seen as 'successfully' resisting a colonial social order, similar perhaps to the Fijian 'purification of money'. However, by stretching the concept of taboo to cover a new class of goods they also succeeded in transforming what Sahlins calls the 'divine finality' of taboos into instruments of political expedience (Sahlins in Appadurai, 1986, 26). This action eroded and transformed the cultural bounds within which taboo was originally conceived. Resistance of this kind to a new economic order, far from being safe, may constitute a Trojan horse of change (ibid.).

Dismissing the 'power of money', Bloch and Parry maintain that the focus should be on how existing worldviews give rise to particular representations of money, rather than the other way around. Their advocacy of the resilience of 'vernacular' societies in the face of capitalism, supported by the curious use of the metaphors 'template' and 'matrix' prefixed with 'cultural' (cf. 1989, 1, 19, 21, etc) when describing this 'resilience', provides a convenient but defective rationale for the marriage of conservation to development.

## (ii) The Social Life of Things

In contrast with the (orthodox) Marxian definition of a commodity, that an object becomes commodity when, over and above its use-value or utility, it assumes an exchange-value (usually a price)<sup>9</sup> that facilitates its exchange, Appadurai defines a commodity as “anything intended for exchange regardless of the form of exchange” (1986, 9). This makes ‘commodity exchange’ a feature of every society. Appadurai’s view that commodity exchange is, as will be explained below, in no essential way different from other forms of exchange (barter, gift giving) is effectively to say that either use-values are not subsumed by exchange-values in commodity exchange or, if they are, it is of little consequence (see Constanza, 1996 for the latter position). This view enables the equation of livelihood with income-generation, an equation also made by ‘mainstream’ conservation and development agencies.<sup>10</sup> It will be argued that this view and the equation it permits are dangerously flawed.

The problem with the traditional definition of commodity, Appadurai argues, is that it often leads to an “excessively dualistic” understanding of societies by dividing them into “market exchange versus reciprocity, materialist and religious; objectification of persons versus personification of things” (1986, 12-13). This conceptualisation of the commodity, he points out, forecloses the question prematurely as to what the conditions may be in which “objects circulate in different regimes of value in space and time” (ibid., 4) - the traditional definition limiting an answer to those regimes organised by the production of commodities only. However, since commodities that were by no means produced for the purpose of exchange can readily become commodities (e.g. antiques and artefacts), “in trying to

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<sup>9</sup> While exchange-value is taken to refer to monetary value (or, theoretically, any quantitative equivalent), it is also contingent upon the underlying mode of production. See ‘Commodification: A Theoretical Outline’.

<sup>10</sup> WWF (Larson *et al.*, 1998), IUCN (McNeely *et al.*, 1990), International Institute of Environment and Development (IIED, 1994, 1995; Eaton and Sarch, 1997, 2-3), Conservation International, Wildlife Conservation Society, World Resources Institute (Repetto, 1985). Attempts to capture ‘hidden’ values in subsistence production and barter, values usually neglected in (cost-benefit) decision-making, similarly equate livelihood with income generation, often for want of a single evaluative standard - seemingly unaware or

understand what is distinctive about commodity exchange, it does not make sense to distinguish it sharply either from barter on the one hand, or from the exchange of gifts on the other” (ibid., 13). Instead, because a commodity is anything intended for exchange, it is exchange itself that becomes the source of the value of objects and not particular objects (ibid., 1, 57) (i.e. those produced under capitalist conditions). Further, since value is established in exchange, our perceptions of value of an object coincide or differ according to what it is that dictates the degrees of value difference between people in a given situation for a given commodity (ibid., 15). This sharing or non-sharing of value standards Appadurai calls ‘commodity candidacy’. What it is that links different value standards to the nature of exchange is politics - in the sense of relations, assumptions and contests pertaining to power (ibid., 57).

While providing a rich interpretative framework, the shortcomings of this thesis are perhaps best revealed by recourse to the Marxian concept of the commodity. Asking what it is that distinguishes a commodity from other objects yields the response that the former is not anything that happens to be exchanged, but something produced for the purpose of monetary exchange. To ignore this quantitative criterion, is to include barter within the definition of commodity-exchange. The import of money (or any quantitative equivalent), however, lies in its ability to facilitate the generalisation of exchange-value, the making equivalent of non-equivalents (labour, products, money) - a central feature of commodity relations. That the exchange-value is quantitative reflects the specific nature of labour transforming objects into commodities (a point to which we will shortly return). Now, to buy something (to pay its exchange-value) is to commodify it, an act that establishes commodity relations between buyer and seller. What the buyer receives is the thing’s use-value, whereas the seller receives its exchange-value. On this basis can ‘anything that is exchanged’ be a commodity? Surely not, because in barter both parties receive the use-values of the other’s products. Defining commodities in this way brackets out exchange-value, the kind labour that produces it and the conditions that sustain it.<sup>11</sup>

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unconcerned as to what a monetary standard implies (see Barbier *et al.* 1991; Godoy *et al.* 1993; Lampietti and Dixon, 1995).

<sup>11</sup> See ‘Commodification: A Theoretical Outline’.

Asking what it is that distinguishes a commodity from any other object, requires asking what it is that commodities represent. A commodity, as indicated, represents a mode of production for the purpose of monetary exchange, a mode that involves quite specific social relations (private property, wage-labour and capital). Without reference to these conditions, one loses sight of the ordering principle of commodity production that relates people to commodities rather than people to people, a principle that has played such a central disembedding role since the advent of capitalist practice (Williams, 1973). Identifying livelihood with income generation follows from having lost sight of these conditions, with the result that the capitalist mode of production is unwittingly universalised. This is not, however, to assert that a commodity *must* be defined in this way. Appadurai's definition, for one, allows a rich and varied account of the biographies of commodities and of peoples' relationship to them. But if our interest, in contrast perhaps with Bloch and Parry's, is not in one but in both sides of the commodity coin - in the disembedding and alienating features of commodity relations as well as its positive - commodities should be defined with reference to exchange-value and the conditions that support it.

The real fault in the proposed definitions lies not so much in the definition but in the concealment of the authors' interests as to why a particular definition should come to the fore. It has long been suggested (Habermas, 1972) that the use of definitions (and other conceptual tools) is conducted along lines of inquiry that presume prior interests. This is because, coarsely put, definitions, like tools, do not necessarily correspond to any 'truth' but rather yield useful or less useful information depending on one's reasons for using them. The choice of certain concepts over others rests on prior interests on the part of the concept-user. Questions about truth then are interwoven with issues of desired ends, that is, politics. Some indication of Appadurai's interests is given in his discussion of the politically-mediated 'regimes of value' in commodity exchange (cf. Appadurai, 1986, 1, 4, 6). But it is not at all clear how Appadurai's definition of commodity-exchange - in no essential way different from barter - can account for alienation in the former but not in the latter.<sup>12</sup> Nor is it clear how commodities, defined in no way differently from other objects of exchange (barter, gifts), can show how the political mediation of exchange (i.e. regimes of value) can

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<sup>12</sup> Since the theme of this work is commodification defined in Marxian terms, alienation is accordingly defined in terms of labour-power, private property and capital (see below).

be called into question and overcome without reference to the political context in which they are sustained and legitimised. Marx's definition of the commodity, for one, gave implicit reference to this political context *and* contained within itself a solution for its overcoming. It is to this definition that we now turn in order to better appreciate the nature of commodification and the consequences of eschewing this for development-led conservation.

## Commodification: A Theoretical Outline

An alternative exposition of the commodity is now offered taking into account the shortcomings of positions above. By commodity is not meant 'anything intended for exchange,' nor is it taken to refer only to a special subclass of primary goods within a neoclassical economic conception of goods that no longer plays a central analytical role.<sup>13</sup> Rather, following Marx,<sup>14</sup> the commodity - at once familiar and mystifying - is inextricably linked to the form of labour that produces it, the creation of both of which characterises what some consider an 'epoch-making' mode of production. Analysing commodity production - as the structuring principle of capitalism - entails that efforts to decipher the mystifying feature of the commodity require an understanding of those elements of capitalism that make its production possible. This is a common difficulty in Marxian analysis; one picks out a single concept and finds it tied to all the rest. Our discussion of commodification must then, of necessity, cover some ground in Marx's analysis of political economy. But far from distracting our attention from commodification it should reveal more clearly its role and dynamics. On the basis of this understanding, we should be better able to grasp the logic which considers 'development' the only viable option for the promotion of conservation objectives, and to be able to suggest alternatives to it.

All objects, it was earlier mentioned, have use-values or utilities, that is, their usefulness, function, efficacy in satisfying wants, tangible qualities and so forth (Marx in

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<sup>13</sup> See O'Neill (1993)

<sup>14</sup> The author's reading of Marx follows the 'earlier Marx', drawing upon Lukács (1971 [1923]) and Marcuse (1955).

Burns, 1937, 405). When products become commodities, they adopt in addition a quantitative value, an exchange-value that facilitates exchange by equalising qualitatively different use-values to a single (usually monetary) standard of measurement. At the risk of oversimplification, while all commodities like objects have use-values, commodities unlike other objects, also have exchange-values. Thus, what makes a commodity a commodity and not a mere object is that it has both use- and exchange-values.

This distinction may appear odd to many of us in a world where most things can, in principle, be assigned a monetary value. But this bemusement signifies an already heavily commodified state of affairs, one in which a particular mode of production, once of marginal importance, has become near universalised: namely the production of things for the purpose of monetary exchange. The predominance of this mode of production offers one explanation for the pervasiveness of the commodity-form today and the familiarity we feel with the logic that assigns things monetary values. In societies, conversely, where surplus production is rare, where “the vast majority of products are intended for the immediate requirements of the producers, social production is a long way from being entirely dominated by exchange-value” (Marx, 1961, 122). But it is not surplus production alone which distinguishes capitalism from pre- or non-capitalist societies. Previous ‘epochs’ had modes of production that enabled production over and above subsistence needs. One reason why earlier modes did not themselves become universalising would appear to lie in a difference of purpose. The primary aim of production under capitalism is not to produce commodities for profit for the purpose of acquiring luxuries, prestige or personal power, but for the purpose of re-investment into production in order to make more profit to re-invest into production and so on *ad finitum*. What makes this dynamic possible, and its spread perhaps irresistible, concerns the convertibility of commodities into capital, a transformation that takes place when two very different commodity-poseessors come into contact. These, as Marx explains, are

on the one hand, the owners of the money, means of production and means of subsistence, who are eager to increase the sum values they possess by buying other peoples’ labour-power; on the other hand, free labourers, the sellers of their own labour-power, and therefore the sellers of labour. Free labourers in the double sense that they themselves do not form part and parcel of the means

of production, as in the case of slaves, bondsmen, etc. and that the means of production do not belong to them, as in the case of peasant-proprietors; they are, therefore, free from, unencumbered by, any means of production of their own. With this polarisation of the market for commodities, the fundamental conditions of capitalist production are given. The capitalist system presupposes the complete separation of the labourers from all property in the means by which they can realise their labour. (Marx, 1961, 142-3)

Capitalism is thus formed when (wage-)labour and capital stand in opposition. This opposition, however, is an unequal one, because one commodity, labour-power, has more value than that for which it is exchanged (wages). And it is largely because of this inequality, that capitalism contains the dynamism it has.

The special nature of labour-power can be illustrated by (as it is reflected in) the twofold nature of the commodity. Commodities, as mentioned, have use-values to be exchanged on the market. Every commodity also has an exchange-value that equates it with all other commodities. This homogeneity by which the commodity can be equated with any other, cannot be ascribed to the use-value of commodities, for, as use-values, they are exchanged only in so far as they differ from one another (that is, if they had the same use-value, differing only quantitatively, there would be no exchange). The exchange-value of commodities, in contrast, is a purely quantitative relation: “as exchange-value, one kind of use-value is worth as much as another kind, if taken in the right proportion. The exchange-value of a palace can be expressed in certain number of boxes of shoe blacking ... Thus, entirely apart from their natural form, and without regard to the specific kinds of wants for which they serve as use-values, commodities in certain quantities equal each other, take each other’s place in exchange, pass as equivalents, and, in spite of their variegated appearance” (Marx, 1904, 21), are all of a piece. Whence comes this homogeneity? The answer lies in the nature of labour. Labour appears as diverse as the use-values produced by it. The labour involved in agriculture is very different from that producing tourist tokens or cloth. Because of the diversity of labour, Marx explains, “what in reality appears as a difference in use-values is, in the process of production, a difference in the work producing those use-values” (ibid., 22). But if the property common to all commodities is labour, then to obtain the homogenising feature of commodities, it must be labour devoid of all *qualitative*

distinctions. That would leave labour as a quantity of labour-power expended in the production of a good, the standard of measurement of which is time. ‘Labour-power’ is indifferent to the form, content and particularity of the labour, since, as a purely quantitative measurement, it is equally applicable to any kind of individual labour. In this abstract and universal form, labour represents the common property of all commodities that constitutes their exchange-value. It is, in Marxian terms, not individual, concrete labour but abstract, general labour that creates exchange-value (ibid., 33).

We thus come upon two entirely different forms of labour: (1) concrete, specific labour (e.g. craftsmen, agricultural labour), correlative to concrete, specific use-values and; (2) abstract, universal labour, expressed in the exchange-values of commodities. Every single act of labour in commodity production comprises both abstract and concrete labour - just as any commodity represents both exchange- and use-value. However, in determining their value, the social production of commodities sets aside the varieties of concrete labour and retains as the standard of measurement the proportion of abstract labour contained in the commodity. This two-fold nature of labour is indispensable to understanding capitalist economic practice because it reveals that, despite appearances, commodity production is not directly orientated to the satisfaction of individual needs (by use-values) but to the production of exchange-value.<sup>15</sup>

This orientation is obscured by that fact that “the social character of men’s labour appears to them as an objective character stamped on the product of their labour; because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour” (Marx in Burns, 1937, 412). The social relation that exists between products refers to exchange-values. It is social in character because exchange-values derive from the social relations of production, namely, between the capitalist and wage-labourer. The mystifying feature of

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<sup>15</sup> The quantification of labour and subsequent abstraction of surplus-value means that labour-power is rewarded only in part, and this from the very value that labour creates. This part-payment in the form of wages has an obscuring function, for it makes it seem as if wages come from some other source of wealth than the expropriation of the worker’s own (unpaid) labour. However, it would be a mistake to infer that the capitalist actively defrauds the labour by purchasing his commodities for less value and selling them on for more than their value. Rather, he exploits the commodity, the purchased labour-power, in order to create a greater value than he began with in the commodity. “This circumstance is the particular good fortune of the buyer [of labour-power] but no injustice to the seller” (Marx, 1968, 208). The surplus-value or profit from this action belongs to the capitalist. For it is he who sells on the commodity.

commodities consists in this social relation ‘appearing as an objective character of labourers’ products’, when in reality it is reproduced by the worker’s own labour, thereby entrenching the basic opposition between it and capital. This mystification, termed commodity fetishism, could be summarised thus:<sup>16</sup>

1. The labour of persons takes the form of the exchange-value of things.
2. Things do have exchange-value.
3. They do not have it inherently.
4. They appear to have it inherently.
5. Exchange-value and the illusion accompanying it (objective character of social relations) are not permanent, but peculiar to a determinate form of society.

As the dominant form of property of society, the commodity embodies relations that dictate the manner in which surplus-value is extracted from direct producers, relations of unacknowledged coercion that are maintained and obscured by exchange-value and the wage-contract.

Where once the goal of production was the simple satisfaction of needs with money sometimes playing a mediating role, now the realisation of exchange-value is the goal of the system and commodities become mediating figures in the valorisation of money (Weber, 1992 [1930]; Polanyi, 1971; Habermas, 1979). Production for the purpose of increasing exchange-value could be characterised as an inversion of previous modes of production. Before capitalism, exchange was driven by the need for others’ use-values. Capitalism eliminates autonomous exchange and subordinates use-value to exchange-value, reversing the value hierarchy with the result that exchange-value acquires an independent logic (Best, 1994, 43). Its magnification is taken for granted. ‘Grow, expand, faster’ is the maxim of capital and requires no justification in terms of improving social existence. On the contrary, this is required to justify itself before it.

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<sup>16</sup> I am grateful to Gordon Finlayson of Philosophy at York University for putting this in a nutshell.

Historically, this inversion occurred under conditions of primary accumulation, a process involving the creation of a wage-labour force, and the amassing of liquid capital.<sup>17</sup> This process resulted in the breakdown of the traditional guild system when it met the economic power of the merchant and industrialist (Marcuse, 1955, 305; Weber, 1967 [1923], 441-455).<sup>18</sup> There arose as a result the modern labourer freed from serfdom and the fetters of the guild and traditional ties, but likewise cut off from the means and instruments through which he might utilise his labour for his own ends. On the one hand, the process had a positive content: political emancipation from ‘traditional’ bonds. On the other, the hitherto unexperienced sense of freedom that the individual enjoyed could only be sustained by selling his labour-power to those who owned the means and instruments of production, to those who owned the soil and the materials of labour. Labour-power and the means for its realisation thus became commodities possessed by different owners. Freedom, as Marcuse notes, came to “mean two things for two groups: for the owners exercised their freedom when they used their wealth to appropriate and utilise the means of production whereas the masses enjoyed the freedom of selling the only good left to them - their labour-power” (1955, 305).

The more the labourer pursued this new freedom the more unfree s/he became. This is because labour not only produces commodities, it also produces itself as a commodity (Marx, 1964, 121), and therein lies the rub. As a commodity within a commodity system, one’s needs can be satisfied only in so far as they contribute to someone else’s accumulation of wealth. The more one works to satisfy one’s needs, the more surplus-value is extracted from one’s efforts, increasing capital and making the worker increasingly dependent on its growth. The relationship of capital (or accumulated labour) to (living) labour, “does not,” Marx explains, “consist in the fact that accumulated labour serves living labour as a means for new production. It consists in the fact that living labour serves accumulated labour as a means of preserving and maintaining its exchange-value” (Marx, 1961, 157). Like any other

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<sup>17</sup> A wage-labour force was created by the enclosure of common land, the wholesale expulsion of persons from their land and the creation of workshops (Marx, 1961, 189). Liquid capital was provided partly by the transformation of arable soil into pasture in order to furnish wool, for example, for a rising textile industry and partly by the accumulation of large pools of wealth through the plunder of the colonies.

<sup>18</sup> After this stage came the normal process of capital accumulation, namely, the production of surplus value by wage labour, the appropriation of this surplus value by capitalists and the conversion of a large part of the surplus value into additional capital.

commodity “the value of the worker varies according to supply and demand ...the existence of capital is his existence ...since it determines the content of his life independently of him” (Marx, 1964, 137).

One system of domination replaced another. In the place of feudal fetters stepped free competition and man, as a commodity, became subordinate to and used by the needs of competition. This more subtle system of servitude, expressed in a loss of and yet bondage to the object of work (Marx in Eagleton, 1997, 28), marks a new alienation: no longer does the object depend on the worker for its coming into being (since the worker, as a commodity, is largely interchangeable with any other quantitatively equivalent unit); rather, it is the object that enables man to exist, first as a worker and secondly as a subject (Marx, 1964, 123). Able to maintain himself as a subject only in so far as he is a worker, this is an alienation both from the object and in it as well: the worker puts his life into the object and his life no longer belongs to him but to the object (Marx, 1964, 122). By extension, commercialising livelihoods is little different. Isolating the ‘economic’ function of an activity called livelihood from its socio-cultural function reduces a way of life to a means of serving one’s subsistence. Human relations narrow and fragment into various divisions of labour when peoples’ creative capacity takes on a predominantly economic form, with the result that it is seldom recognised that work, communication, satisfaction of needs and personal life can and should be one and the same thing.

Although the alienation-creating nature of commodity relations is central to Marx’s critique of political economy, the object of Marx’s criticism was not the commodity per se as an object in trade sustaining social existence, but its fetishization in capitalist conditions of production and exchange, its magnification to the point where it conceals the underlying relations of production. The main problem with commodity fetishism is that it contains the false belief that the agent’s own activity is a process beyond his or her control (cf. Guess, 1981, 13-14). Products confront their creators with (the appearance of) a power and life independent of their own activity, giving rise, as outlined, to the sense that the existing order of things is objective and ‘given,’ when in fact, it is reproduced by their very own labour.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Commodity fetishism, in consequence, comes to legitimise the kind of social arrangements in which, Habermas argues, “as long as the self-expansion of capital determines the outcome and the ends of production, as long as production is for the sake, not of use-values, but primarily exchange-values, thus not for the wealth

Supporting the status quo by reproducing the conditions that advance it, commodity fetishism simultaneously frustrates emancipatory possibilities. For, by instilling the belief in the objectivity of the prevailing social order, it helps prevent the realisation that although people are subject to history, they can also be subjects of it.

Central to perceiving capitalist relations ‘as they are’ is an adequate definition of the commodity, one that inherently refers to the production of exchange-value, that is, to the social relations of domination and servitude, and one that hence contains emancipatory content. Revealing or ‘de-mystifying’ these social relations could not occur without reference to exchange-value as the defining feature of the commodity, a feature which, it is remembered, Appadurai’s thesis eliminates. To consider income-generation in no essential way different from livelihood, is to sanction the extension of commodity-relations and its consequences. ‘Development’, as this is otherwise known, is seen as the only viable option by players such as conservation because the latter’s evaluative perspective is already alienated. With every money-based assessment of livelihoods and wild resources, use-value is subsumed under exchange-value and capitalist practice is thereby implicitly universalised.

The central need for development-led conservation is therefore to restore the concreteness of livelihood. Decommodifying livelihood requires recollecting the subsumption of use-value to exchange-value, a recollection born from reflection upon the context in which livelihood was commodified; namely, the division of labour in two. A development which alienates people and subordinates their autonomy to the extension of commodity-relations under the guise of fulfilling needs, is not development but impoverishment. Development must come to mean the promotion of conditions within which livelihood and non-alienating relations can flourish. To ‘develop’ is to be able to freely and spontaneously relate to people rather be related to them by mediation outside one’s control and comprehension. It means the ability to take one’s life in one’s own hands and change it free from external powers and external goals. This form of development subsumes commodification to individual and collective autonomy rather than the other way around.

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that is to satisfy the needs of society but, on the contrary, for a wealth whose needs society must satisfy, the

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process of labour will remain subjected to the process of capital investment” (1974, 234).

### 3

## CASE STUDY - THE SETTING

The foregoing analysis of commodification has hopefully shed light on the rationale that underpins development-led conservation and on some key concerns. It also sets the scene for a complimentary study of the motivational factors involved in the adoption of commodity-based practices by a hitherto predominantly subsistence society. To enable a proper investigation, a brief understanding of the ethnography and history of the people in question together with environmental conditions is required.

### Methodology

Fieldwork was conducted from May to July 1999 with a tribal community,<sup>20</sup> a non-governmental organisation (NGO) and other relevant persons, using the standard anthropological method of participant observation. Information was sought using a triangulation procedure.<sup>21</sup>

The time period of the fieldwork determined its limitations: information was collected during the pre-monsoon season which is lucrative for non-timber forest product (NTFP) sale. It would have been interesting to see how the tribals fared in economically harder times so as to investigate what kinds of support there is from kin and other relations and to what extent these are utilised. Some difficulty was met disclosing information on the medicinal plant trade, unsurprisingly perhaps, because of the allegedly wide-scale illegal trade in these species.

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<sup>20</sup> 'Tribals' or Adivasi, meaning 'original inhabitant' in Hindi and used in the discourse of officialdom in India, is frequently employed as a means of descriptive reference although in some contexts, it has pejorative connotations because of essentialist ethnic and economic distinctions associated with it. In this work, the term will be used descriptively, on pragmatic rather than essentialist grounds - as a term of convenience.

<sup>21</sup> Important information was cross-referenced using several key informants, written material and other sources. Recordings were transcribed by two independent guides.

Tribal worldview as expressed in religion and ‘magic’ received only oblique attention during the fieldwork. It would simply not have been possible to do justice to these important subjects in the time available in addition to the primary focus of the study. Where it is deemed relevant to the discussion, information is drawn from other sources and fieldnotes.

## Biogeography

The Nilgiris or literally ‘Blue Mountains’ are situated 11° north of the equator at the confluence of the Western and Eastern Ghats, two prominent mountain ranges that run parallel along the coastline of India (Figure 3.1). Arising as a massif out of the surrounding planes, the Blue Mountains form the unique biogeographical island-like environment (Lengerke and Blasco, 1989). Consisting of an area some 2 400 km<sup>2</sup>, the elevation of the Nilgiris falls between 1 000m above sea level (msl), constituting 53% of the land area, and over 1 800msl (47%), giving the plateau an overall much cooler climate than the adjacent planes.<sup>22</sup>

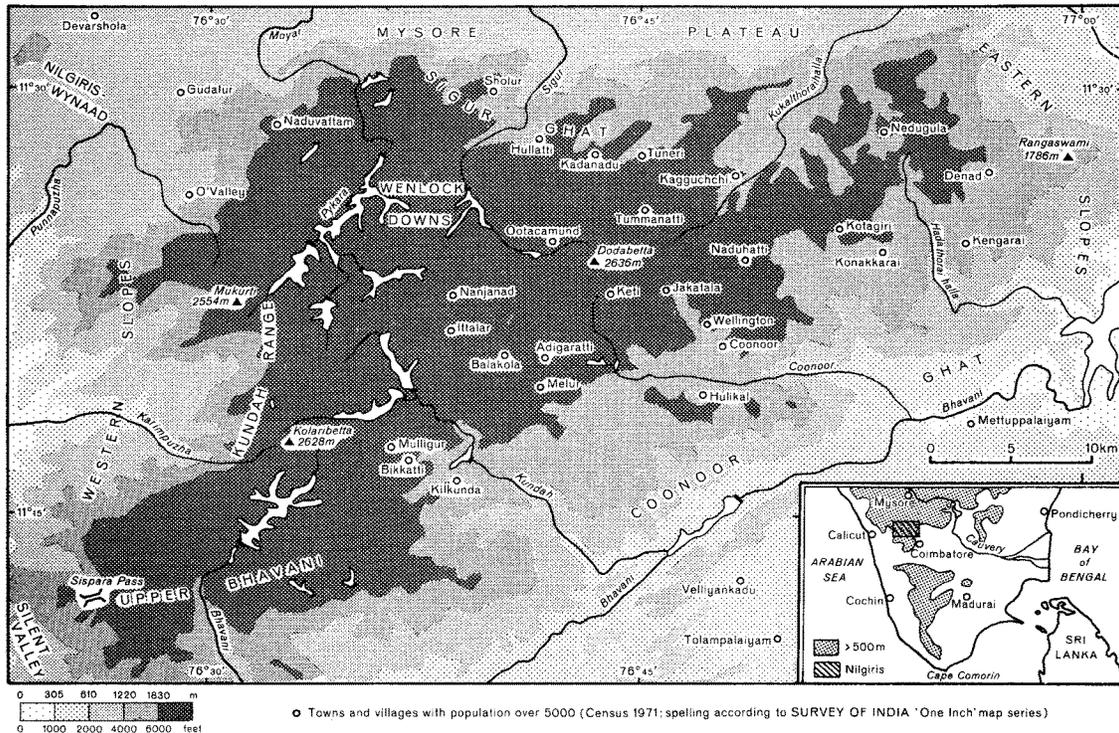
Four different vegetation types can be identified in the Nilgiris: (1) dry deciduous forests and thorny tickets in lower allegations (<1 100msl), (2) dense moist evergreen forests (1 000-1 800msl) cloaking the slopes, surmounted by (3) the hilly plateau of Sholas or Montane forests (1 800-2 200msl) and (4) grasslands (>2 200msl) (Mulley in Venugopal, 1993; Lengerke and Blasco, 1989). Within these environments, the Nilgiris are home to an extraordinary variety of flora and fauna, containing over 100 (reported) species of mammals, 550 species of birds, 30 species of reptiles and amphibians and 6 non-human primates (Mandelbaum, 1989, 3). It is home to many endemic species including some 80 plant

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<sup>22</sup> The Nilgiris receive 1 800 mm - 4 500 mm rainfall annually depending on the topographical location (Gopalkrishnan, 1995, 62) (although 2 000 - 5 000 mm rainfall in just one rainy season is not uncommon (Lengerke and Blasco, 1989, 39) ). This, together with its elevation, gives the Nilgiris a pronounced seasonality, in contrast with the uniformity of equatorial climates in general. The seasons are: North East monsoon or winter (Nov.-Feb.), Summer (March-May), South West monsoon (June-Sept.) and the inter-monsoon period (Oct.-Nov).

species (Mulley in Venugopal, 1993) and some of India's largest populations of endangered species.<sup>23</sup>

Currently a revenue district of Tamil Nadu State, much of the original Nilgiris forests have been lost to tea and coffee plantation and agriculture. Monoculture plantations (typically *Eucalyptus globulus* and *Acacia* spp. for firewood, for tannin and rayon industries and to arrest soil erosion) and industrialisation (e.g. hydro-electric schemes) especially since the 1950s, have likewise contributed to the diminishing of the original forest cover to the slopes and glens. Regrowth has been hampered in many areas by the extensive use of synthetic pesticides on plantations (Keystone, 1994, i, 53). In view of the threat to the ecological richness of the Nilgiri region, it was declared a UNESCO 'Biosphere Reserve' in 1986 in the hope of restricting further deleterious land-use (Venugopal, 1993).



**Figure 3.1.** Nilgiri Hills, Tamil Nadu State, South India (from Hockings, 1989, 22)

<sup>23</sup> The Gaur or jungle Buffalo (*Bos gaurus*), Nilgiris Tahr (*Hemitragus hylocrius*), barking deer (*Muntiacus muntjac*) liontailed macaque monkey (*Macaca silenus*), tiger (*Panthera tigris* L.) and the less endangered panther (*Panthera pardus* L.), sloth bear (*Melursus ursinus* Shaw) and elephant (*Elephas maximus* L.).

## Ethnographic Background

Prior to the arrival of the British in 1820s, the primary inhabitants of the Nilgiri Hills were the Todas, Badagas, Kotas, Kurumbas and Irulas, whose economic interdependence was characterised by a well-defined barter system that nurtured what many consider a symbiotic social relationship between these people (Mulley in Venugopal, 1993; Mandelbaum, 1989, 145; Hockings, 1980, 99-131; Zagarell, 1997, 23). Each ethnic group performed special functions for the other and each needed the special functions of the other for important parts of its own culture. The Badagas, who are Hindu agriculturalists and possibly earlier migrants from the Vijayanagar Empire (Mysore) some 450 years ago (Hockings, 1980), supplied grains, cloth, salt, sugar and even opium to the tribal groups in return for items the Badagas did not procure themselves. The pastoral Todas whose economic and religious interests centered on their Buffalo herds, supplied milk and dairy products. Their presence was considered necessary at certain Badaga and Kota ceremonies. The Kotas who were the principal artisans and musicians, provided tools, leather work, pottery and other farm- and household implements. The forest-dwelling Kurumbas and Irulas both provided various jungle produces, with the Kurumbas also providing magical and ritual services. While the exchange system has often described as 'symbiotic', the Badagas - being of far superior numbers<sup>24</sup> and possessing greater wealth not to mention the agricultural productive capacity for the increase of both - occupied the most influential role in the exchange system. Their influence is indicated perhaps, by the predominance of their language, Badagu, as the 'Lingua Franca' in pre-British times, throughout the Nilgiris.

Two groups will receive particular attention in this study: the Kurumbas and the Irulas. They will be presented combining fieldnotes with previous ethnographies, followed by a discussion of relevant socio-cultural changes that have taken place since the 1820s.

### (i) Alu Kurumbas

### *Economy*

The ethnic group recognised as Kurumbas<sup>25</sup> were foragers and food-gatherers mostly residing in the southern and eastern part of the Nilgiris. Their dwelling-place, as the name Kurumba, meaning ‘jungle-dweller’ in Badagu suggests, is typically in isolated jungle areas. Previous accounts describe them hunting and snaring birds, mammals and fish and gathering wild foods from the jungle (Kapp and Hockings, 1989, 236). From there they collect tubers, leafy vegetables, fruits, medicinal herbs, bark and roots, honey, beeswax, resin, vines and timber. Possessing a detailed knowledge of medicinal plants which, together with (highly esteemed) honey that they prefer to collect, they developed a specialised high-value, low-volume foraging strategy (Keystone, 1998, 8). Much of their sustenance derives from the forest<sup>26</sup> and from modest cultivation.<sup>27</sup> But their agriculture, once slash-and-burn, was never practised in the systematic manner characteristic of more sedentary tribes (Thurston and Rangachari, 1987 [1909], 161, 164). They also keep a few poultry and goats, although less so than the Irulas (Table 3.1 provides an overview of sources of sustenance).

Like the Irula, sharing is commonplace. Food, tools, articles of clothing and even money is shared among kin according to need. Able to be subject at any time to the (mutual) obligation of sharing, property is potentially a common rather than private possession. This obligation of sharing, practised also by a Kurumba subtribe the Nayakas (north-western Nilgiris) and described by Bird-David as a constant “idea that one should share space, things and actions with others” (1999, 72), is for the Kurumbas, more kin and less community-orientated. Kurumbas’ mutual obligation of sharing generally stop at kin boundaries. The Irula, in contrast, appear to stand in between Kurumbas and Nayakas in this respect. The practice of sharing also stands as a counterpoint to the sense of indebtedness engendered in and noted by Morgan to play a crucial role in barter and other

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<sup>24</sup> The Badagas comprised perhaps some three-quarters of the indigenous Nilgiri population in the 1820s (Hockings, 1989, 208).

<sup>25</sup> In this study, the term ‘Kurumba’ refers to the Alu/Palu Kurumbas unless otherwise stated. Other Kurumbas in the Nilgiris include Mullu Kurumbas, Jenu Kurumbas sometimes called Kattu Nayakas (cf. Bird-David, 1989), Bettu Kurumbas, Urali Kurumbas and Mudugas (Zwelebil, 1981)

<sup>26</sup> A good proportion today also derives from wage-labour, a point discussed in greater depth in ‘Socio-Cultural Changes’.

<sup>27</sup> Kurumbas typically cultivate ragi, tenné and kiré millets (*Eleusine corocana* Gaertn., *Setaria italica* Beauv. and *Amarantus* respectively), yams (*Dioscorea* spp.), maize (*Zea mays* L.) as well as numerous vegetables,

economic transactions with outsiders (1876, 100; see also Morris, 1977). Having received payment in kind in advance or a loan of goods, Kurumbas and Irulas are linked by debt to certain outsiders and are often exhorted to repay by labour or minor forest produce<sup>28</sup> (cf. Bird-David, 1989, 271).

In the exchange of goods and services between tribes, the Kurumbas had closest ties with the Badaga. Kurumba settlements were often located close to Badagas communes, where they provided medicine and sorcery, together with forest produce and woven products (baskets, brooms). This exchange exhibited a defined set of mutual obligations. According to Kapp and Hockings “Kurumbas are expected to supply the Badaga commune with three baskets ... cane or reeds” (1989, 237). In return, the Badaga would often give the Kurumba salt, coarse sugar, cloth and grain, the latter grown on fields upon which the Kurumbas themselves were often expected to work. The Kurumba males might also be expected to serve as watchmen for a Badaga commune, performing both guard duties against malign sorcery and occasionally curing Badagas ailments (cf. Thurston and Rangachari, 1987 [1909], 166-7). For these reasons, Kurumbas were considered ‘associates’ of the Badaga, although some consider bonded-labour a more accurate term.

### *Religion and Sorcery*

The Kurumba religion is said to be animistic but included ancestor worship (Kapp and Hockings, 1989, 242). Rocks, trees, animals and spring water are worshipped and form a focal point for songs, folklore and legend in which, as an oral culture, much of the Kurumbas’ collective memory is stored. The enactment of folklore, legend and song thereby reminds the Kurumba of his or her past, encouraging a sense of belonging, at the same time as it reaffirms his or her connection with the forest and spirits that are integral to their meaning.

Particularly renowned for their sorcery, the Kurumbas, many Badagas believe to be the most effective of all South Indian sorcerers: “he can kill people as a distance with a spell,

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spice plants (typically chilli *Capsicum frutescens* L. and pepper *Piper nigrum* L.), jack (*Artocarpus heterophyllus* Lam.), mango (*Mangifera indica* L.) and banana (*Musa sapientum* L.).

<sup>28</sup> Irula-Kasavas dwelling in the northern Nilgiris tend Badaga cattle and similarly receive payment in kind. This reward (say, a sari) is said to generate a sense of indebtedness to the Badaga who, incidentally, is fully aware of the favourable deal he is receiving from the transaction.

can secretly remove internal organs from the living, can rape women without their knowledge, can enter a locked door and can change into an insect or any sort of mammal” (Kapp and Hockings, 1989, 239). As a result Kurumbas were often held in fear and suspicion by neighbouring tribes. Early descriptions refer to the Kurumbas as having

little or no intercourse with the more civilised inhabitants of the neighbourhood. The latter indeed prefer to keep them at a distance from their houses, as they stand in considerable dread of them, looking upon them as sorcerers or mischievous people, whom it is unlucky even to meet. If they suspect a Kadu-Kurumba of having brought about illness or any mishap by his spells, they punish him severely, sometimes even putting him to death. (Dubois, 1906, 76)

Fear of the Kurumbas thus by no means prevented them from attacks by other tribals and references to the Kurumbas are often replete with accounts of Badaga and Kota attacks on individual Kurumba families, which continued as late as the beginning of this century (Thurston and Rangachari, 1987 [1909], 171).

### *Honey Hunting*

It has become a common anthropological technique to reveal complex relations, collective assumptions (doxa) and features constitutive of a society (habitus) by exploring a single event in some depth.<sup>29</sup> In this respect, it would be most interesting to examine the Kurumbas’ practice of ‘honey-hunting’ for which they are particularly famed.

The collection of rock honey (of *Apis dorsata*) from the towering cliffs of the Nilgiri hills (some colonies reside in cliffs of up to 500 ft.) holds special significance for the Kurumbas. For centuries considered a valuable good by tribals and caste alike, rock honey or *Barajenu* has been gathered for the purpose of consumption, medicinal use and exchange. The honey-hunting process itself is set within an elaborate system of rituals, prayers, offerings, taboos, songs and folklore which (help) serve to affirm the Kurumbas’ ‘kinship’ with the bees and to respect the cliff-dwelling deities. Twelve days before the honey season (April-July), for example, Kurumba males will bathe regularly, intermittently fast and completely abstain from meat. They will sleep outside away from their wives. Such acts are said to aid mental preparation. Prayers will be offered in a pre-season ceremony seeking

the ‘blessing’ of the Kurumba gods. Answers may come in the form of the sign - a worshipped (puja) item falling to one side may signal a deity’s blessing; while falling to another, it may signify a deity’s displeasure with the cliff in question. This could be interpreted as ‘incorrect conduct’ during the ceremony and an answer may again be sought or, frequently, the cliff will be left untouched for the season. This procedure is repeated for every climbing venture, although to a much briefer and less elaborate extent. The purpose of the smaller ritual is to explain the number and intent of those seeking rock honey to the cliff-dwelling deity, to request its protection from forest animals (panthers, sloth bears, tigers, elephants and so forth) and malevolent spirits and to inform the deity when they will depart.<sup>30</sup> Upon extraction of the hives, the first honey is offered by the *Pujari* or ‘priest’ in three directions to the deities of the area (the rest, incidentally, is shared equally among the gathering party).

Evidence of what could be called the Kurumbas’ ‘kinship’ with the bees is located in their famed honey-song. Sung only while collecting honey on the steep Nilgiri cliffs at night, the song addresses the Queen-bee as a mother-in-law and the bees as potential brides, whose prospective sons-in-laws have come to gather honey. “How could a mother of one’s wife refuse to support the son-in-law in his work?” (Demmer, 1997, 178). How could the daughters sting their future husband? This is the theme of the song: mutual obligation among affines (ibid., 181). Indeed, affinal relations play an important part of honey-hunting. As far back as records reveal, honey-hunting has been conducted by the conjugal pair together with other conjugal pairs or relations such as the trusted brother-in-law.<sup>31</sup> The conjugal pair is also the basic unit in economic activities. The collection of minor forest produce, raising children, cooking and other activities are shared equally between husband and wife (ibid., 172; Bird-David, 1989, 267). Since, as Demmer points out, “there are no lineages, unilinear or agnastic descent groups,” interpersonal relations are “situated in a chain of mutual obligations in a moral order of kinship that stresses filiative and most important... affinal bonds” (Demmer, 1997, 170). The conjugal pair hence appears as a

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<sup>29</sup> See Bourdieu (1977) on ‘habitus’ and ‘doxa’.

<sup>30</sup> In some areas, the ritual has become partially ‘Hinduized,’ (that is, if one accepts a difference in kind between tribal and Hindu religions. Thin, pers. comm.) adopting the use of incense, coconut, bananas, rice and money - typical puja items (noticeable among the resettled Jenu Kurumbas in the Masinagudi area in the northern Nilgiri foothills).

social unit central to the reproduction of Kurumba society in more ways than one. Its centrality is contrasted by its opposition (in terms of mutual obligations) to the relationship between brothers, between whom enmity and competition often exist. So much so that brothers will never collect rock honey together (ibid., 182): the honey collector's life depends on the person at the top of the cliff who, were it his brother, could cut the rope and claim the unfortunate climber's wife as his own. Such acts of treachery are not altogether uncommon and have been preserved in folktales such as the Honey Narrative (*Jenu Parasanga*). For these reasons (not to mention the substantial danger that bond the gathering group together), honey-hunting could be thought of as a 'habitus' (cf. ibid., 166, 168), a practice that mediates symbolic form (ritual, deities), social action (preparation and gathering) and social structure (conjugal pair) in a manner habitually constitutive of Kurumba society.

Kurumba honey-hunting has also aroused the attention of conservationists (Keystone, 1994). A collection group (minimum of three, usually four to eight) will use two ropes, baskets for honey collection and long bamboo sticks with sharpened ends or hooks (*satuka*) for cutting the comb from the rock (knives and other iron implements are forbidden to touch honeycombs). Much ecological knowledge underpins the selection and weaving of forest vines (*Hardwickia birata*) into ropes (taking up to a week), the use of leaves and vines in basket and smoker making (to sedate the bees) and the use of plant paste (*suti kodi*) for bee stings, cuts and bruises. In addition, some customs regulate honey collection. If, as mentioned, a cliff-deities refuses the Kurumbas' offering before the expedition, it signals the deities displeasure with the venture and the cliff-face may be left for the rest of the season. Some cliffs belong to the spirits ('God's' cliffs) from which no honey is extracted. Equally, cliffs that are the scene of a climber's death become strictly taboo (cf. Keystone, 1994, 19). As a result of these observances, in some cases up to 80% of *A. dorsata* hives are left untouched. It is an unintended consequence perhaps of such customs that the *A. dorsata* population in the Nilgiris has never been threatened with over-exploitation.

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<sup>31</sup> See also Demmer's study of the collection group structure (1997, 172-6).

(ii) Irulas

The Irula are found mainly in the southern and eastern slopes of the Nilgiris (Figure 3.1). They are generally considered to have drifted to the Nilgiris from the hilly terrain of Kerala to the West and Coimbatore to the south. The most numerous of tribal groups today, numbering roughly 6-7 000 (Table 3.2), the forest-dwelling Irula are considered to have led a primarily hunter-gatherer way of life thought by some (TRC, 1987, 26) to have continued until the middle of this century; although, for many Irulas this had been complemented by a degree of wage-labour since the latter part of the 1800s<sup>32</sup> (Thurston and Rangachari, 1987:2 [1909], 376-7). They are still well-versed in the art of foraging from which a good portion of their sustenance is derived (Table 3.1). The Irula are said to be in possession of excellent medico-botanical knowledge of the herbal wealth and related vegetation in their immediate vicinities (Mulley in Venugopal, 1993, 14). They are described as good hunters of game (Jebadhas and Noble, 1989) and collect minor or non-timber forest products (NTFPs) in large quantities deploying a foraging strategy covering a much wider area and securing a larger volume than the Kurumbas (Keystone, 1998, 8). Typically the Irula will collect

wild fruits, herbs and roots to appease hunger, along with beeswax, drugs, dyes, gum, honey and medicinal herbs. The gathered products were exchanged with lowlanders for clothes or food ... To supplement the food further, Irulas once regularly hunted and caught game in snares and traps. (Jebadhas and Noble, 1989, 285-6)

Although NTFPs collected vary according to season, as a whole, they are collected for the purpose of own consumption, shared among family and kin, bartered and occasionally, in the case of tree honey (*Kolanjenu* from *A. florea* and *Kumbajenu* from *A. cerana*), given as gifts. In addition to NTFP trade, Irulas engage in artisanal work producing musical instruments, baskets, brooms all derived from the forest.

A notable feature of the Irula economy is their multi-layered gardens where plants such as coconut, jack, silk-cotton, mango, chillies and bananas are cultivated having being brought back as seeds and saplings from the forest (Buchanan, 1870:I, 462; Jebadhas and

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<sup>32</sup> Discussed in 'Socio-Cultural Changes'.

Noble, 1989, 289). The Irula once practised slash-and-burn in the forest to cultivate millets. Upon the adoption of more sedentary agricultural practices, agricultural land, Jebadhas and Noble note, was used at one point on the usufruct basis (1989, 289). Any sign of this has disappeared. Land is inherited by and in theory divided equally between the family's next generation.

<u>Ethnic Group</u>	<u>1940-1950</u>	<u>Present day</u>
Irula	Foraging: yams, fruits, honey, herbs (seasonal) Hunting: small to large game, jungle fowl, fish Agriculture: multi-layer, single layer gardens dry field crop cultivation (slash/burn on own lands) Livestock rearing: chickens, goats, some cattle (Irula/Kasava kept Badaga cattle in bonded-labour relations) Trade (barter): homemade baskets, brooms, clarinets, winnowing fans, honey, herbs, small quantities of NTFPS Priest's fees: in kind or occasionally cash Wage-labour: sporadic and seasonal work on plantations (usually 1-2 days/week, no more than 3); also 'shikari' (tracking for British game hunting)	Limited foraging: as before (limited to own consumption or restricted sale through co-op.s) Hunting (officially forbidden): in lesser quantities than before Agriculture: as before Livestock rearing: as before Trade (sale): as before - increased amounts of NTFPs, small tea and coffee plantations, cultivated forest produce (e.g. fruit, pepper) Priests fees: rare Wage-labour: on plantations (usually 3-4 days/wk) Smuggling: sporadic (peaked in 1970s) - medicinal plants, elephant tusks, sandalwood, teak, rosewood
Alu Kurumba	Foraging: similar to Irulas, less extensive, greater specialisation on honey and plants Hunting: similar to Irulas Agriculture: similar to Irulas, less systematic and no gardens Livestock rearing: chickens, goats, no cattle Trade (barter): homemade base flutes, drying baskets, bamboo vennela, honey, NTFPs Fees (in kind or occasionally cash): for services as healers, magicians and musicians, predominantly for Badagas Wage-labour: as for Irulas although less frequent (shikari very rarely)	Limited foraging: as for Irulas Hunting: as for Irulas Agriculture: as before Livestock rearing: as before Trade (sale): as for Irulas Fees (usually cash): declining Wage-labour: plantations (usually 3-4 days/wk) Smuggling: as for Irulas

**Table 3.1.** Main features of the Irula and Kurumba economy, 50-60 years ago and presently.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Earlier information adapted in part from Noble, 1968, 86.

## Socio-Cultural Changes

The tribals' interdependent exchange system is generally thought to have survived until the middle of this century (Mandelbaum, 1941, 22-3; Hockings, 1997, 4). For some time previously, however, certain events conspired to undermine hunter-gatherer society and the inter-tribal dependence. For ease of identification some of the more important are listed, albeit ahistorically, below:

1. British influence
  - land acquisition
  - taxation
  - plantations
  - deforestation
2. Forest Department restrictions
3. Immigration
4. Direct 'Commodification' of tribal relations
5. Expansion of transportation into remote areas
6. Middlemen and money lenders
7. Governmental and non-governmental organisation intervention

The first changes came with the British migration to the Nilgiri plateau in the 1820s. Initially sought as an area for the rehabilitation of British soldiers and as a cool retreat during the hot season, the British soon found that the Nilgiris had ideal climatic and soil conditions for tea. The development of tea plantations during the middle of the last century attracted a huge influx of immigrant workers (Table 3.2), mainly Tamil and Malayalan (Kerala State) from the surrounding planes. This had several perceptible effects on the existing ethnic groups. The Badaga who, until then were the largest and economically most powerful group, found themselves steadily overwhelmed by the immigrants. Prior to the census of 1821, it is said that the total Nilgiris population consisted only of 'indigenous' tribal communities, with the Badaga making perhaps three-quarters of them (cf. Hockings, 1989, 363; see also Morris, 1976, 138-40). By 1871, the Badaga constituted some 36% of the total Nilgiris population, already less than the immigrants, and over one hundred years later, in 1981, they constituted less than 19% (Table 3.2). The Badaga had to compete or

become subservient. They attempted the former, switching from subsistence crops like millets and other grains to monoculture cultivation like potato.

<u>Ethnic Group</u> <sup>34</sup>	<u>1871</u>	<u>1981</u>
Badagas	19,476	146,000
Irulas <sup>35</sup>	1,470	5,900-7,045
Kurumbas <sup>36</sup>	3,966 (Alu K.: 613)	4,874 (Alu K.: 1,174)
Todas	693	1400
Kotas <sup>37</sup>	1,112	832
Four 'original' tribes <sup>38</sup>	25,247	153,106,
Immigrants <sup>39</sup>	27,707	630,169

**Table 3.2.** Population changes in the Nilgiris from 1871 – 1981.<sup>40</sup>

The adoption of a market-orientated production strategy, while to some degree successful for the Badaga, had the effect of marginalising and of transforming relations with tribals. It was marginalising in the sense that barter and the customary obligations that underpin it were reduced and restricted to exchange between certain individuals rather than families or communities as a whole.<sup>41</sup> It was also transformative in the sense that it began to commodify remaining tribal relations. Forest produce was awarded in cash rather than kind

<sup>34</sup> The figures are not as accurate as is usually the case in demographic studies. Many groups were and still have not been counted satisfactorily. This is particularly true of the Kurumbas who are too scattered, isolated and ill-defined (Mandelbaum, 1989, 145-6).

<sup>35</sup> Includes Irula-Kasavas. One reason for heightened population growth is thought to derive partly from changes in classification and the desirability of belonging to certain classes, not the least for reasons of tribal-designated state benefits (Mahias, 1997). It is not uncommon today for tribal children, even Kurumbas, to call themselves as Indo-Irula at school, a designation which often informs census considerations.

<sup>36</sup> Includes principal Kurumbas types: Alu, Jenu, Bettu, Mullu, Urali and Mudugas.

<sup>37</sup> The decrease in the number of Kotas is partially attributable to a smallpox epidemic.

<sup>38</sup> Todas, Kotas, Kurumbas and Badagas, excludes Irulas.

<sup>39</sup> British, Malayalam, Tamils, Kannada-speakers and other immigrants. Since the 1960s, this category has increasingly been composed of repatriated Sri Lankan Tamils.

<sup>40</sup> Sourced from Mandelbaum, 1989, 145-6; Grigg, 1880, 29-35; Noble, 1968, 5; Gazetteer of Nilgiris, Tamil Nadu (Gopalkrishnan, 1995).

<sup>41</sup> In most cases today, for instance, only the Kurumba headman, *Mudule*, retains any sense of duty toward his associated Badaga commune. Equally, few Todas “consider it worth the trouble or the indignity of going to each house to get their due [*Gudu* or gift, once annually given in remembrance of Toda help offered to Badaga immigrants], while few Badagas see it as a duty rather than mere charity to give visiting Todas anything” (Hockings, 1980, 116). Most Badagas, according to Hockings, are more concerned with such matters as the supply of credit and fertilisers, with the hiring of day labourers and with governmental programmes rather than with ancient links and prerogatives (Hockings, 1980, 213-45).

(grains, clothes), and Kurumbas and Irula increasingly found themselves working for wages on Badaga fields. Indeed, to continue to obtain the Badagas agricultural produce - now a commodity - required cash, thus compelling tribals to engage in wage-labour.

The commodification of the tribal economy was further accelerated by the British desire to raise revenue from the Nilgiris. The first European settler on the plateau, John Sullivan (Hockings, 1989, 207), is reported to have lamented the potential revenue lost in tribal barter. This was partially rectified by the imposition of taxation requiring tribals to carry some official currency (Füer-Haimendorf, 1985, 97-8). In a peculiar but characteristic move, soon after their arrival the British identified one group, the Todas, as 'owning' most of the prime land in the Nilgiris and thereupon proceeded to buy land for a pittance (cf. Parthasarathy, 1995, 163), displacing many tribals geographically and ideologically from ancestral land. The Kurumbas, for one, were largely confined to the slopes of jungle valleys. The purchase, needless to say, did much to undermine the Badagas own concept of and claim to land ownership. For the Irulas and Kurumbas, the idea of owning large tracts of land, especially for 'semi-nomadic' Kurumbas, is said simply not to have existed. As a result, they gradually lost *de facto* usufruct rights over considerable areas to the expanding tea industry (Jebadhas and Noble, 1989, 289).

The hunter-gatherer way of life began to decline from this time onwards. While deforestation made way for tea plantations forcing once sparsely populated tribals into denser settlements, the Forest Department (an institution established for commercial forestry and conservation)<sup>42</sup> took control of India's vast forests, prohibiting slash-and-burn agriculture (1882 Madras Forest Act) and restricting hunting (1879 Nilgiri Game and Fish Preservation Act). Shortly after Indian independence in 1947, forest gathering had been restricted to the tribals' own consumption and to limited sale to state-regulated co-operatives (LAMPS). The Forest Department also began to resettle many tribals from core to peripheral forest areas, claiming that the tribal lifestyle (including accusations of poaching) was deleterious to the forest ecology and hence, commercial returns.

When most of the British withdrew from India around the time of independence, many Badaga working in British households found themselves owners of large plantations. The

Badagas' affluence grew as many abandoned market garden cultivation to concentrate on tea and coffee production. The Irulas and Kurumbas working for the Badagas became exposed thereby to their increasing wealth (particularly tribal women who had more frequent access to Badaga landlords' houses) and began to mimic the new Badaga lifestyle. The decline, Jebadhas and Noble remark, of the seasonal reliance upon forest produce was, notably for the Irulas, related to an increased liking for rice and other 'exotic' foods which were now attainable through money (1989, 289). Over the last few decades, these 'carrot' incentives to adopt market-orientated economic practice appears to have become of increasing importance, perhaps more so than the aforementioned 'sticks' (cf. Morris, 1976, 147).

Additional exposure to the new world of goods and mainstream Tamil culture came with the building of roads in remote areas and the extension of public transport thereupon, a development doubtless for the benefit of tea and coffee transportation, but one which gave Irulas and Kurumbas easier access to market towns and the markets to them. Improvement in transportation, signalled regular appearances of middlemen and moneylenders at tribal villages, buying forest produce and artisanal wares at extremely low rates or in return for alcohol (Table 3.3). Unfamiliar with the value of money, it was easy to hypothecate tribals and thereby derive a steady income from their ignorance, a phenomenon Fürer-Haimendorf observed in numerous tribal-moneylender situations in other parts of India (1985, 98; see also Morris, 1977, 234-5).

Further intervention since the 1970s, albeit with a somewhat different intent, was conducted by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and governmental departments eager to improve the lot of the tribals.<sup>42</sup> Usually this consisted of income-generating schemes, formal education and 'conscientization' or 'awareness-building' of tribals to help them deal with the new world of which they are now a part.

## Semmenarai and Keystone

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<sup>42</sup> Although it was perhaps less commercial than statist, selling forest produce cheaply to industry for political gain (Thin pers. comm.).

<sup>43</sup> Although the Todas were helped much earlier.

The bleak picture painted of the tribal situation is a general one.<sup>44</sup> Not all tribal communities were exposed to the same degree to these influences, and hence not all tribals have experienced the same degree of social change.<sup>45</sup> According to Hockings (1989, 365), there are even some communities which have continued comparatively ‘unscathed,’ continuing a quasi hunter-gatherer existence until the last few decades. The village of Semmenarai (or Jembanare in Badagu), provides an interesting object of study in this respect. Situated in relatively isolated lush, subtropical rainforest (Konnakkarai Slopes Reserved Forest) in the North-Eastern slopes of the Nilgiri Hills (c. 1 400msl), Semmenarai is composed of Irulas and Kurumbas who, until recently followed traditional, subsistence economic practices. Initially, a Kurumba settlement, the Irulas migrated from the foothills some 7-8 generations ago (200-250 years ago) and now constitute the majority in the village (102 Irula families and 6 Kurumba families).<sup>46</sup> The nearest town is Kengarai, a Badaga settlement some 2-3 hours walk away, with which the Semmenarai Kurumbas are ‘associated’.

With the commodification of Kengarai Badaga-tribal relations and the expansion of tea plantations into the area 70-80 years previously, the inhabitants of Semmenarai begun ‘participating’ in the cash economy some 50-60 years ago (two generations), predominantly in the form of wage-labour. Prior to this, there was little involvement in the cash economy. Indeed, with the nearest market towns of Mettupalyam requiring over five hours walk to the road and then a further one days’ trek or Kotagiri over one day’s walk away, there was little incentive for market purchases (in the 1940-50s Kengarai was little more than a village). At that time, journeys to a market town would be made at most once every two or three months.

Sustenance was acquired from the forest, from their agriculture and from bartering with the Badaga. Today both Kurumbas and Irulas engage in wage-labour (coolie work) usually

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<sup>44</sup> Indeed, not all social change need be seen as deleterious. Mandelbaum writes that “most people of the [Nilgiris] region, it is my firm impression, are better nourished than were their parents half a century ago, better clothed, better educated, enjoy better health and longer life” (1989, 18).

<sup>45</sup> The Todas provide an interesting example here, participating in mainstream economic activities yet retaining strong sense of identity and custom more than most (Walker, 1989).

<sup>46</sup> The village is constituted by seven settlements (five Irula and two Kurumba) where families live together in self-built, one or two room thatched houses. The Kurumbas homesteads are often described as “untidy and wild looking, close to large rocks used for various functions like drying, cleaning, washing, sharpening tools and cutting firewood” (Keystone, 1998, 7). The Irula, in contrast, occupy “very neat houses and clean front yards, their homesteads full of useful and ornamental trees” (ibid., 9).

between three to four days per week, working predominantly for nearby Badaga landowners. With Semmenarai lying in forest area designated as 'Revenue Forest' where limited cultivation and gathering is permitted, tribals spend much of their 'spare time' cultivating crops and foraging in the forest.<sup>47</sup>

Most families own land, on average two acres, from which they sell their own tea and coffee to larger processors. This enterprise developed as a result of NGO efforts to increase tribals' 'standard of living'. Collaboration with the Semmenarai tribals took some time to develop. When first approached in the early 1980s, they would flee into the forest rather than face newcomers or townsfolk. Initial work began with the building of a crèche and the supply of tea saplings and spices by NAWA (Nilgiris Adivasi Welfare Association) and UPASI (Union Planters' Association of South India). NAWA claims that the tribal "families are financially self-supporting now" (NAWA, 1998, 19) a somewhat misleading claim made by excluding the continued tribal dependence on wage-labour. In fact, the inhabitants of Semmenarai stand mid-way between full wage-labour and financial 'self-sufficiency,' unable to relinquish wage-labour because their own small plantations and NTFP sales do not, as yet, provide an adequate income. This tension is confounded by rising prices of commodities (dhal, rice, cloth and so forth), the tribals' own increasing desires for 'commodity-wealth'<sup>48</sup> and the parasitic role of middleman and moneylenders. The building of a road to Kengarai, about 10-15 years prior (early 1970s), and the provision of a daily bus service has naturally accelerated contact between middlemen and tribals (the first of whom began visiting Semmenarai 30 years ago).

When Keystone Foundation, an eco-development group based in Kotagiri, began working with Semmenarai in 1994, they were told to expect difficulties. 'There are many problems: indebtedness, alcohol-related strife, conflict with immigrants and cultural decline' (non-observance of customs). 'The tribals in this area are spoilt,' it was lamented, 'they can pick and choose between the offers of NGOs and government officials opting for the biggest immediate return deal available'. Partly as a result of this, Keystone decided to work first with poorest group in Semmenarai, the Kurumbas. They were also selected because of the

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<sup>47</sup> The Irulas (as least in the area of study east of Kotagiri) were semi-sedentary, occupying fixed settlements but migrating south to Coonoor for new foods where they stayed with relatives. This practice continues only among the elder generation today.

importance of Kurumba honey-hunting to the biodiversity in the area. The native bees, *Apis dorsata*, *A. florea* and *A. cerana* are considered ‘keystone’ species.<sup>49</sup> If the ecological benefit of the bees can be brought to light and their activity extended by being properly valued, Keystone point out, it is hoped that some of the factors that both contribute to biodiversity loss and inhibit reforestation (pesticides and insecticides from plantations, deforestation and land-use changes (Keystone, 1994, i) ) may be countered. Equally, those social factors that devalue Kurumba honey-hunting, particularly “exploitation by middlemen [who] give them a low return not commensurate with the effort, time, skill and dangers faced” (ibid., ii), and the denigration of tribals in general needs to be rectified. Supporting Kurumba honey-hunting is one means of contributing to this re-evaluation.

In this respect, Keystone’s methods reflect current conservation policy that seeks biodiversity conservation by means of income generation.<sup>50</sup> Enhancing income generation from these often poorly paid activities, Keystone argue, is likely to preserve local’s interest in the bees which, in turn, supports a keystone species central to the biodiversity of the forest area. To this end, Keystone purchase rock and tree honey at premium prices (Table 3.3). In order to improve the hygiene of processing and thereby its quality, they provide training in honey extraction and filtration. Keystone also supply beehives (with the native *A. cerana*) and technical assistance as well as train tribals in the processing and marketing of honey and wax products with a view to this enterprise one day being run by the tribals themselves. If they have no choice but to participate in the market economy, Keystone seems to suggest, let it be in ways of cultural and personal importance to them.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Commodities, money and money-generating activities. More is said about this term in the following section.

<sup>49</sup> Much in the same way a keystone is indispensable to the support of a bridge, the pollinating activities of bees are crucial to the flourishing of many flowering plants and, as a consequence, dependent herbivores and predatory carnivores. Protecting keystone species is a priority for conservation efforts, since, needless to say, if a keystone species is lost from a conservation area, numerous other species might be lost as well (Primack, 1993, 43).

<sup>50</sup> The same principle is used by another Nilgiris NGO (ACCORD) who work for tribal land rights and health. ‘Commercialising tribals’ labour and producing commodities,’ they maintain, ‘is the only way - barring strict legal sanctions and the means of enforcing them - for tribals to be able to resist the temptation of selling their land to unscrupulous middlemen.’

<sup>51</sup> It should be noted that the tribals are by no means obliged to sell to Keystone. However, as Table 3.3 indicates, they receive considerably more by doing so than by selling to middlemen.

<u>Commodity</u>	<u>Market value (Rs)</u>	<u>What middlemen offer tribals (Rs)</u>	<u>What Keystone offer tribals (Rs)</u>
Honey ( <i>Apis dorsata</i> and <i>A. cerana</i> )	150/L	15-30/L	60-75/L (quality dependent)
Coffee ( <i>C. arabica</i> and <i>C. robusta</i> )	80/kg	35-40/kg	55-60
Tea	6.5-8/kg	-- <sup>52</sup>	--
Pepper ( <i>P. nigrum</i> )	240/kg	130-170/kg	190/kg
Jackfruit ( <i>Artocarpus heterophyllus</i> Lam )	40-65 (size dependent)	10-25	--
Silk-cotton ( <i>Ceiba pentandra</i> )	100/kg	7-8/kg	40
Broomsticks	15-20	4-6	--
Labour (agricultural)	50/day (men) 30-40/day (women)	--	50/day (men and women)

**Table 3.3** Comparative returns for selected tribal commodities.

Keystone run two further programmes in Semmanrai. They promote the organic cultivation of crops such as coffee (*Coffea arabica* and *C. robusta*, which are ecologically better suited than tea to Semmenarai's climate and soil), silk-cotton (*Ceiba pentandra*) and pepper (*Piper nigrum* L.). The aim is both to introduce the idea of polyculture cultivation without the use of synthetic pesticides and fertilisers and to further increase tribal earnings, decreasing the need for wage-labour. Additionally, Keystone has begun (1998) promoting the cultivation of traditional millets to improve the nutritional value of tribals' current diets (often rice and dhal). Restoring this traditional cultivation practice is thought to retain associated ecological knowledge together with sowing and reaping rituals and customs tied to it (cf. Harkness in Thurston and Rangachari, 1987 [1909], 168).

<sup>52</sup> Tea leaf prices fluctuate very often. Due to a highly competitive market, most are said to receive a fair rate.

## MOTIVATIONAL RESPONSES TO THE EXTENSION OF COMMODITY RELATIONS IN SEMMENARAI

### Something for Nothing: Tribal Difficulties with Money <sup>53</sup>

“Why on earth after twenty years of education and help do these people still not understand the monetary value of their resources?” This quote from an exasperated fieldworker typifies a common concern among development programmes: much of the success in improving the lot of tribals hinges on whether or not they are able to grasp the value of money. Without this understanding they are likely to continue to be exploited, unable to receive a fair price for their products nor be able to save for prosperity.<sup>54</sup> To an extent, the inhabitants of Semmenarai reinforce this observation. According to some NGOs,<sup>55</sup> interaction between middlemen and tribals is characterised by exploitation and subservience. Middlemen come daily to Semmenarai, where they receive free board and lodging, to buy forest produce for very low prices, selling them at a nearby market for a substantial profit (Table 3.3).<sup>56</sup> Tribals, it is frequently lamented, are notorious for their inability or unwillingness to negotiate prices with middlemen: even if a middleman names an extremely low price, they will agree, almost without hesitation.<sup>57</sup> Further, it is fairly easy

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<sup>53</sup> The key question as to why tribals are embracing commodity-wealth (i.e. money, money-generating activities and commodities) is approached by examining what in some respects is its inverse. This is conducted in order to avoid one-sidedness and to falsify, to a degree, conclusions drawn from the analysis of the focal question in the following section.

<sup>54</sup> An observation similarly found in other pre- or semi-monetised ‘vernacular’ societies (Pimbert and Pretty, 1997; Harper, 1998, 7-8, 19).

<sup>55</sup> Primarily, Nilgiri Adivasi Welfare Association (NAWA), ACCORD, Keystone Foundation, Krishni Vigyam Kendra (KVK-UPASI), AWARE, Masinagudi Youth and Tribal Welfare Association (MYWA); see Morris (1977, 231-3) for a similar account of the Hill Pandaram of Kerala State and also Fürer-Haimendorf, 1985.

<sup>56</sup> Jackfruit, for example, grown in Irula gardens or fetched from the forest might be bought for a mere Rs 10 each and then sold in Kotagiri for Rs 50-60; or broomstick, a common Irula ware that retails for Rs 15-20 would be bought for just Rs 5.

<sup>57</sup> Middlemen often pay for tribal produce with cash and alcohol, the latter now a common feature of Semmenarai village and an increasing source of friction between kin. The rise in middlemen’s visits, in addition, has been coupled with a rise in venereal disease among tribal women. Partly as a result of naïvety

to secure tribals' consent to loan offers, with tribals only later realising that their hypothecation to moneylenders is usually quite beyond their means of restitution. Their readiness to agree and apparent inability to say 'no' to offers and demands have also become hallmarks of wage-labour. It is not uncommon for tribals (particularly Kurumbas), having agreed to work for a period on a plantation, to leave without prior warning sometimes for several weeks to attend a festival, funeral, collect honey or to see a beloved (cf. TRC, 1987, 26). Upon receipt of wages or cash from NTFP sale, few save their earnings; much of it being spent within a day or two, frequently on alcohol, tobacco and betel nuts. Knowing that they will be rewarded handsomely for honey and wax (Table 3.3), a recent trend among the Kurumba honey-collectors, is to hire a jeep to Kotagiri, rather than walk or take a bus, to sell to Keystone. Since this undertaking costs Rs 500-700, the equivalent of more than a week's wage (Table 3.3), needless to say, not a great deal of money returns home, let alone be set aside as savings.

It is felt that if tribals could evaluate their resources monetarily - an act contingent on their being able to 'understand' the value of money - it would then be less easy for middlemen and moneylenders to exploit them. With forest produce more highly valued, it would be managed more frugally, and less frequently given for free thereby aiding general conservation objectives. As such, an understanding of the value of money would be central to increasing their standard of living and escape poverty, or 'coming up' as it is known locally. The continued exploitation of tribals by middlemen is frequently argued to derive from the former simply not knowing the market value of their produce. This argument may have been tenable in the early 1980s, but not now after almost twenty years of NGO intervention. But if tribals know the value of their produce at the market, why do they not charge more?

Several possible reasons may be evinced from the discussion. The first is perhaps the more obvious. Since a monetary appreciation of resources is, for the most part, only relevant in commodity relations, that is, in relations where most things can in principle be

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regarding townfolks' intentions, and partly a consequence of familiarity with sex from a young age (most families occupy the same one-room house), tribal women, it is claimed, are fairly easily won over for a small monetary sum or item of clothing by middleman at home while the husbands are out, or more commonly at work by plantation employers (see also Morris, 1977, 238).

bought or sold,<sup>58</sup> one reason for the tribals' lack of monetary understanding of their forest resources may lie partly in the fact that they have not (yet) been economically alienated by wage-labour. Their engagement therein is sporadic and season-dependent, generally limited to several days a week (Table 3.1), with some - almost invariably the older generation (generally above 60) - still acquiring a good degree of sustenance directly from the forest without the mediation of money. This degree of involvement in wage-labour may explain in part why tribals are said not to understand the value of money. For, as was indicated earlier, if the value of money derives from the labour-time of the worker (the 'power of money being the alienated life-force of humanity' in more colourful Marxian prose), then because tribals' involvement in wage-labour is limited, their understanding of the value or power of money should also be incomplete.<sup>59</sup>

Though shedding some light perhaps, this suggestion will no doubt be considered by some to be too generalising. For a start, the lack of monetary understanding evident in the older generation is by no means uniform in the younger. Indeed some show considerable 'entrepreneurial spirit,' a point we will follow up shortly. Nor should one ignore the social context within which this non-understanding takes place, a context involving caste or Badaga persons toward whom a long-standing sense of inferiority is said to underpin interaction (cf. Bird-David, 1989, 270-1; Mulley pers. comm.), compounded no doubt by their increasing numbers. Indeed, some have begun to view Badaga-tribal relations as more exploitative than symbiotic (ACCORD; Parthasarathy, 1995, 163; for an early account see Thurston and Rangachari, 1987 [1909], 174). Certainly, it is little disputed that the Badaga benefited more than tribals from exchange, and bonded-labour, whether it be Kurumba watchmen or Irula-Kasava tending Badaga cattle, worked only one way. Badagas were never obliged to work for tribals. But labelling those relationships exploitative raises the question just what, for the tribals, constitutes power? While the Badaga were undoubtedly at the top of the economic hierarchy, the Kurumbas were at the top of the ritualistic one. Having this status may have been more important for the Kurumba. Indeed, living in a

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<sup>58</sup> An appreciation encouraged by the assignment of a monetary value to all aspects of the environment (also known as incorporating environmental externalities into (what is taken to be) the cost-benefit nature of decision-making), the task of environmental economics.

<sup>59</sup> Conversely, one might add that for them money may have incomplete power, a point explored shortly.

fairly abundant forest, what need would the Kurumba have for the kind of affluence the Badaga enjoyed?<sup>60</sup>

No doubt this argument could invoke a response concerning the modes of exercising power and contexts of inferiority, a response requiring a more detailed understanding of Badaga-tribal relations than this study allows. Nevertheless, the argument on economic inequity serves to open up an equally fruitful line of inquiry into the notion of wealth itself. Semmenarai, to reiterate, is situated in lush evergreen forest which provides an extraordinary range of fruits, roots, honey, plants and earlier, even 'clothing'. A young Irula considers this abundance in relation to financial returns: 'it is easy money. We don't fertilise anything. Just plant tree or collect from forest'. Fruits, herbs and the like are seen as gifts from the forest. They are freely available without the need for reciprocation. Receiving monetary payment for these gifts is therefore easy money, regardless of the amount. What is seen as exploitation by some (NGOs) may well be source of perceived benefit by others (tribals). In addition, the metaphors of the gift and giving freely, which frequently constitute tribals' references to the forest, lend weight to the contention that the forest is not perceived to be a resource to be manipulated for the acquisition of sustenance; rather, it simply gives freely. Bird-David has noted a similar attitude held by Nayakas (1990, 190; cf. also Thurston and Rangachari, 1987 [1909], 164). The Nayakas refer to the forest, the rivers, hills and spirits that dwell therein as 'big father' (*dod appa*) and 'big mother' (*dod awa*) and to themselves in that context as 'son' (*magan*) and 'daughter' (*magal*). The forest as 'parent' is considered to give to its children, much in the way a parent cares for a child, freely and without expectation of reciprocation.

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<sup>60</sup> Some have argued (Mulley pers. comm.), that the idea of their being exploited by Badagas would have never arisen among the tribals; they may have thought that they were actually benefiting from the relationship. If so, analogies could be drawn with the lord-serf relations in feudal Europe where it is sometimes argued (Ollman, 1976, 196-209; Hall, 1994, 119) that the idea of the serf being exploited by being tied to the land and obliged to serve a lord's family, may never have risen to consciousness - such was the sense of immutability of the social order at that time, no doubt reinforced by the divine sanction this order received. Arguing from this analogy, how could it be claimed that the tribals were exploited if there was no consciousness of their being dominated in any respect, and, if there was no consciousness of domination where stands the argument for tribal inferiority? In reply, is not the most insidious use of power that which secures others' compliance by manipulating their desires without their knowing that they have been influenced? (Lukes, 1974, 23). It could perhaps be argued that the tribals' belief that they were benefiting from the relationship whilst ignorant of underlying power interests, constitutes false consciousness, one deleterious to their own interests.

It is noteworthy in this respect the disinterest Kurumbas have shown toward domestic beekeeping advocated by Keystone. In spite of providing, free of charge, beehives, technical assistance and larvae, not to mention the substantial financial benefits available in return for minimum effort, most Kurumba beehives have fallen into dilapidation. ‘They simply do not have the right mentality for this sort of thing,’ a Keystone member explained. ‘They are more opportunistic; they like to follow the seasons. Their diet changes according to what is offered by the forest at a specific point in time. And the forest, they believe, shares with them’. Sharing, we noted, was also a commonplace feature of social life. Cooked food, clothing, forest items and even money were shared chiefly according to need between kin close and distant (cf. also Bird-David, 1990, 193 and 1999, 72). Never depicted in the language of bargaining, sharing, Demmer observes, was more in the spirit of the gift (1997, 184). As a consequence, distribution was never achieved by exact counting, this being considered inappropriate and against the ‘ethic of generosity’ (ibid.).<sup>61</sup> The idea and practice of sharing also appears to have informed that of storing. Storing grains, honey and other forest produce for the purpose of later consumption in harder times or to be shared among guests (especially honey), was generally limited to the family’s needs and that which was to be shared (cf. also Noble, 1968, 97). Since stored items could serve as a means of maintaining convivial relations with kin and friends, the purpose of storage appears more social than private. While it is possible that the primacy of sharing and notion of forest as bearer of gifts could help explain the foreignness of charging money for forest produce (not the least since, in ‘giving situations’ feelings of indebtedness may arise toward the offering party which reinforce the norm that one cannot ask for more), these features also constitute what will be argued to be a concept of wealth which, it is hoped, may offer a fuller explanation of tribal’s reluctance to charge more or even at all.

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<sup>61</sup> Kurumba scholar Bird-David’s comments on sharing among the Nayakas (a subtribe of Kurumba) appear to hold true for the Alu Kurumba of Semmanrai: “a Nayaka was normatively expected to share with everybody as and when present, especially (but not only) large game” irrespective of criteria and entitlement (1999, 72). The practice of sharing, also served as a habitus within which agentive negotiation, manipulation and conformity took place. Following Bird-David (1990, 191), if someone, say, Raju, wants something, say, tobacco leaves and he asks Mari to give him some, if Mari were to refuse, he would be criticised for being stingy, so he gives Raju some tobacco leaves. Later, Mari notices that Raju has some tobacco leaves. Wanting one, he does not remind Raju that he gave him some leaves the few days ago. He merely asks Raju to give them tobacco leaves because Raju has some and he does not. Both can avoid giving away items by creating circumstances in which they can avoid being asked, for example by hiding items or themselves.

A wealthy man, one is told, was one who had several head of cattle (more common among Irulas), goats and chickens and food crops. He would be strong and healthy and would know some magic. Good at hunting, he would be able to satisfy his family's hunger. He would have an intimate knowledge of the properties of plants for tribal medicine, magic and nutrition. Moreover, he would be a man who took care to maintain good relations among kin as well as to members of his community (i.e. by observing 'obligations' of sharing). For in times of hardship (crop failure, pests, animal attacks, disease and so forth), one could rely on social relations. These qualities, according to the older generation, constitute a wealthy person.<sup>62</sup> The point to note here is that when wealth is defined primarily as foodstocks, cattle, crops, clothes and the like - in short, as tangible items, their accumulation is limited both to one's ability to manage or store them and by their physical decay. In this sense of being wealthy one can always have *enough*. In contrast, when wealth is defined in monetary terms, no such natural or social limits exist. Money is neither subject to biological processes of decay nor intrinsically contains the concept of sufficiency. On the contrary, as a numerical value, its idiom knows only *more or less*. This shift in the concept of wealth, it may be recognised, is none other than a shift from use-value to exchange-value. But does this not mean that those who engage in money acquisition forego the concept of enough? How can this be if tribals have, for several generations, engaged in wage-labour yet purport to still abide by the above concept of wealth? A clue can be found in the duration of their labour-time. According to the elders, the average working week used to consist of two days, sometimes less depending on the season and the ethnic group (usually less for the Kurumbas).<sup>63</sup> Quite why they worked so little when it is remembered the abundance of labour opportunities provided by nearby tea and coffee estates, is the mystery. When questioned about this, elders would typically reply that 'we worked two

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<sup>62</sup> A similar observation was noted by the NGO ACCORD who work with *Adivasis* in the Gudalur region of the Nilgiris (Figure 3.1). When asked to define 'wealth,' community elders "classified as wealth their children, ... their knowledge, the forest, their unity and their culture. Not a single person [elder] said 'money' or 'property' " (Thekaekara, 1998, 13). It is interesting to juxtapose this concept of wealth with the outcome of ACCORD's efforts to "spread awareness about their rights, [to] fight injustice, exploitation... and land alienation" (ibid., 12) in part by helping people plant and sell tea, coffee and pepper. "As a result of increasing the income of individuals," Thekaekara explains, "a lot of the community spirit had been destroyed... [and, by securing land rights] families are now moving out of the village and building houses in the middle of their individual plots" (ibid.).

days because two days wages gives us enough'. When asked why they did not want more money, some replied that they valued their 'own time' more than a higher income.<sup>64</sup> It would appear that in spite of available wage-labour and in spite of a degree of monetisation of their economy, their material aspirations remain consistent with sustenance needs and the norm of sufficiency prevailed.<sup>65</sup>

It is interesting in this respect to draw parallels between the tribals and pre-capitalist central European peasant labourers (Weber, 1992 [1930], 57-60). Despite the decline of subsistence production and the expansion of production for the market they did not change the duration and intensity of their work: guilds set uniform prices for different qualities, forbidding all forms of competition, and producers, who were still the owners of the means of production, were free to determine the nature of their labour. The norm of sufficiency – sufficient payment for the producers, sufficient fees for guilds, sufficient profits for the merchant – was so deeply rooted in the traditional mode of life that it was impossible to obtain more intense or prolonged labour from workers by promising them higher wages. For the worker, Weber explains, "the opportunity of earning more was less attractive than that of working less. He did not ask: how much can I earn in a day if I do as much work as possible? but: how much must I work in order to earn the wage, 2½ marks, which I earned before and which takes care of my traditional needs?" (ibid., 60). Likewise in Volume I of

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<sup>63</sup> An observation shared by Jenu Kurumba, Irula-Kasava and Sholega elders in the Masinagudi area. (Situating, in Figure 3.1, at the edge of the Mysore Plateau of the Nilgiris, in between the Moyar and the Sigur rivers, north-west of Sholur).

<sup>64</sup> Similarly when the resettled Hill Pandaram in neighbouring Kerala were presented with a variety of employment options in forest reserves they "prefer[red] to devote their energies to the gathering of forest products and neither agricultural nor paid labour in the afforestations seem to have been accepted as alternative modes of subsistence" (Morris, 1976, 138).

<sup>65</sup> A similar restraint or disregard for monetary gain, depending on one's point of view, has been noted in Eastern Canadian Indians (Ojibwa, Cree) exchanging beaver furs in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century. As Martin explains (1978, 10), tribes who brokered the fur trade between companies and interior Indians were unresponsive to financial incentives to increase the volume of pelts exchanged. As seasoned traders had pointed out many times, to raise the price of Indian furs would result in the surrender of fewer rather than more beaver skins. The reason for this inelastic supply, Martin suggests, seems to be that the Indians insisted on viewing trade as a form of gift exchange. The Indians would supply themselves with just enough furs to satisfy their limited needs and there was seemingly nothing the companies could do to persuade them to go beyond that quota.

Woodburn (1980) noted a corresponding sense of foreignness to prevailing monetary practices, particularly saving, by a number of hunter-gatherer societies who, he argues, operate on the basis of an 'immediate return economy'. A number of features of the immediate return system find resonance with the Semmenarai tribals (especially the Kurumbas): few possessions which can be manufactured easily from materials that lie in abundance around them; a lack of interest in developing technological equipment; and a lack of 'foresight' or long-term planning regarding the acquisition of sustenance and other necessities.

*Capital*, Marx supplies a vast literature attesting to the extreme difficulty managers of workshops and factories had in getting their labour to work regularly, day after day and week after week. It was not enough to deprive the workers of the ownership of the means of production, as the manufacturers had already done; it was also necessary to reduce the amount paid to workers per production unit, so that they would be compelled to work harder to obtain sufficiency (1973, 692-5). Similarly for the tribals, an increase in the average duration of work from two to four days per week over the last fifty years (Table 3.1) could be ascribed to a comparable compulsion, namely, that of increasing prices of purchased necessities (grains, cloth, etc). But there is a further explanation: increasing desires for commodity-wealth. What made (and makes) tribals switch from working 'to get enough' to working to get in excess of subsistence needs will be discussed shortly.

It is noteworthy that by focusing on the 'material' exploitation of tribals, development efforts would seem to imply that the practice or habitus of sharing is 'out of synch' with that required by the market economy (the habitus of accumulation). With sharing much restricted today and money in particular seldom shared at all, it seems to follow that a further consequence of shifting the concept of wealth (from use- to exchange-value) is to re-orientate the habitus of sharing to that of saving. If so, and if it be deemed important to arrest further undermining sharing practices and the former notion of wealth, then it would be advisable for NGOs to reconsider the kinds of incentives employed to secure the participation of tribals. Do incentives enhance or diminish tribals' institutions and habitus (e.g. sharing) critical to the reproduction of the society or, as will be argued in the case of Semmenarai, do they polarise inequalities? It is important to identify whether tribals are following conservation programmes in order to get enough to live or in order to make more money. For if it is not entirely the latter, conservation efforts may well assume what they could end up proving: that local people are really only motivated if they perceive monetary benefits. And the consequence of assuming this is to extend commodity relations which, as we have seen, is to extend relations of servility and domination.

## Embracing Commodity-Wealth

### (i) Why the Attraction?

Upon inquiring why it is that tribals have difficulty valuing their resources in monetary terms and with money in general, it was found that the social context of subservient behaviour, 'incomplete' alienation, the long-standing 'habitus' of sharing and indebtedness and what was called an ethic of sufficiency based primarily (but not exclusively) on a different concept of wealth have a considerable bearing. It is a change in this last factor, the concept of wealth, which we will now address by inquiring into why tribals embrace 'commodity-wealth,' that is, money, money-generating activities and commodities. In attempting an answer, we find ourselves drawn almost exclusively to those under 50-55 years of age. For in contrast with the older generation, it is people within this age group who collect NTFPs predominantly for the purpose of monetary exchange, cultivate cash crops and engage in wage-labour for 'necessities' such as food, whereas before, these were acquired directly from the forest and by means of barter.<sup>66</sup>

It would be useful to begin by recalling a story relayed by my guide concerning the new-found desire for commodity-wealth among tribals, particularly Irulas.

Nowadays, a husband may like to buy his wife a gas stove [Rs 2 000]. It cooks fast; within ten minutes there is no work. She likes to sit. She needs a cushion and sofa. Why? She likes to relax because she's becoming free. She likes to sleep in a bed. During the day, she gets bored because cooking is finished in 10 minutes. She needs TV. Soon after she may require a cable TV. With a cable

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<sup>66</sup> Typical material changes include the acquisition of transistor radios, cosmetics, saris, foodstocks (rice, dhal) and aluminium rather than mud pots and bamboo storage vessels. Clocks, calendars and family photographs - displayed on the outside rather than inside the house for reasons of prestige - are particularly desired (calendars inform tribal tea producers when tea should be picked and of debt repayments). Wealthier families might aspire to buying foodstocks from the more expensive private shop rather than the co-operative. They might wash with pricey soaps rather than the nutrient-rich mud from river beds. Their houses will be built from brick with cement to plaster walls (government houses) and covered with tiled rather than thatched roofs. Gas cookers instead of wood-fuel may be adopted for cooking as will beds rather than mats on the ground for sleeping. Electric lighting is often desired as is an electricity supply in general for a television (most villages have at least one, occasionally functioning, government-sponsored television).

installed, he may want to ask his friends about programmes, so he may want a phone...

Wealthy tribals such as these prefer to live apart from the community; the geographical distinction adding to that already created by their conspicuous consumption. Others in the village may come to seek their advice and they may even offer them credit.<sup>67</sup> The following key persons involved in commodity relations may provide a wider picture of the general motivation.<sup>68</sup>

*Chinnaramman: or the 'Protestant' Work Ethic?*

Chinnaramman is a Kurumba in his early thirties who devotes much of his time to his cash crops. He cultivates an unusually high 6 acres, predominantly tea as well as coffee and pepper, supplemented by wage-labour (usually 4 days a week, depending on the season). Sale of honey from beehives and from NTFPs in general also contribute to his income, some of which (e.g. betel nuts) are sold to other tribals in Semmenarai. Chinnaramman employs members of his own family to work his crops. While this may 'keep money in the family,' it already signals that the notion of the whole family working the field and equally sharing in returns from its yield has been abandoned.

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<sup>67</sup> They can afford this because comparatively well-off tribals are often the preferred recipient of loans - it being inferred that they, more than most, will have the means and inclination to repay debts, and can thereby acting as a role model for others.

In line with the seasonality of labour and trading opportunities, the means by which commodity-wealth can be increased is manifold. Tribals have the choice of:

- (1) Extending wage-labour on Badaga tea and coffee plantations over and above subsistence needs of the immediate family.
- (2) Taking out loans from the co-operative Bank, middlemen and occasionally NGOs to establish or enhance their own modest tea and coffee fields (usually no more than two acres).
- (3) Working with Keystone to help to enhance their coffee, pepper, silk-cotton and domestic honey production and in whom, together with the wild honey, they are assured a favourable price.
- (4) Following from this lucrative and, to be fair, genuinely supportive market (in Keystone), some of the younger tribals (25-40) exhibit enough confidence to charge middleman more for their forest produce and artisanal work (cf. Visu and Tamaraj below).
- (5) Saving, more than most options perhaps, is considered to be the key to increasing wealth. It is interesting that women are often 'assigned' the job of saving and meeting loan repayments - their efficacy in this is thought to derive partly from the fact that since most loans and wages come from Badagas, unsuccessful loan repayments may have repercussions for women's wages.

It is rare to find all five options pursued simultaneously. Most prefer to earn from their own lands and the forest if they can than from coolie work, a move supported by NGOs (Keystone, NAWA, UPASI today).

<sup>68</sup> While much information was received from female informants, the 'gender bias' in the selection of detailed examples was, due to the particular conditions of fieldwork, an unfortunate inevitability.

Chinnaramman breaks the usual Kurumba mould of being uninterested in coolie work and market ventures, for which they are frequently called lazy by the more enterprising Irula. Having taken out several loans for the purpose of increasing his agricultural production, Chinnaramman is now the third richest person in Semmenarai, a feature for which even Irulas pay him respect. Yet his economic zeal seems to proceed from an active rejection of certain features of his tradition. When his father, Andi, who was both headman and Pujari of the Kurumbas died, Chinnaramman rejected both titles, passing them on to his cousin.<sup>69</sup> Others in the village comment that he has little interest in folklore, legend and some customs or in maintaining traditional links with the Kengarai Badagas, ties held so highly by his father.<sup>70</sup> Chinnaramman even claims that he no longer collects rock honey, arguing that he gets more money from his crops. In spite of the dubious nature of this claim, it is interesting that the justification was in financial terms. Chinnaramman more vigorously opposes the infamous Kurumba sorcery which, he argues, poses the biggest threat to his community: it colours children's minds, makes them think of the forest encouraging absenteeism from school and makes them not want to 'come up'. 'If they can get education, they won't want to be involved in sorcery. They will want good jobs'. By improving the standard of living and education, Chinnaramman hopes there will be no more need for sorcery. It is interesting that the increasing trend to pay magicians to do things against others which leads magicians to want more and more money is a point that Chinnaramman particularly despises,<sup>71</sup> but nevertheless follows the same 'commodified' path. The importance of commodity-based work to Chinnaramman is shown perhaps when asked were

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<sup>69</sup> At Andi's funeral the usual rites (see for example Hockings, 1989, 242) were not observed at all. When questioned it was revealed that the Kurumbas knew only half of the proper rites and rituals and, rather than conduct them incompletely, which is to risk the receipt of misfortune, they decided to drop them altogether.

<sup>70</sup> Chinnaramman's low regard for traditional ties with the Badaga is not uncommon. Many now see the barter system as too restrictive: one is dependent on a particular person exchanging a particular good. Monetisation offers freedom from what is now often perceived to be exploitative relations of the inter-tribal barter system. Freedom from those relations offers, for some, the opportunity to choose the place and, to an extent, the form of work. A good example is found among the Irula-Kasava in the northern Nilgiris (Masinagudi area). When the local NGO, MYWA, conducted an income-generation programme in the early 1990s providing for some for the first time an alternative to tending Badaga cattle, for one Irula-Kasava women, Devi, this income was at the same time a chance to break with age-old bonded-labour to the Badagas. This relationship, Devi explains was one where "we milked their cattle, and they milked us" referring obliquely to the 'access' Badaga landlords had to Irula-Kasava women (John, pers. comm. MYWA, 1992-4).

<sup>71</sup> Kurumba magicians have, for a long time, received payment for their services, either in kind or in cash (the current standard rate being Rs 101.25). It would appear to be the 'perception of a market' for their services and the desire to make money therefrom that Chinnaramman finds problematic.

his income to double on what it would be spent, in contrast with the usual answers such as good cloth, alcohol, feasts and so forth, Cinnaramman declares he would spend it on enhancing his agricultural output (increasing his field size, buying fertiliser and improving irrigation). He would also build another house to add to his existing four.

*Tamaraj: or a challenge to community order?*

Tamaraj, an Irula aged forty, represents what is for many the pinnacle of success. Aspiring to the Badaga lifestyle in diet, dress, household items and to some extent behaviour, he owns several houses, the largest plantation field and is widely acknowledged to be the wealthiest tribal in Semmenarai. His three children are sent to the convent school in Coonoor where tuition is in Tamil and English. His hope for his children is that they will never have to live as his parents did.<sup>72</sup> With sustained exposure to alternative lifestyles, one's parents' or grandparents' lifestyle is often seen as too harsh: 'why should we live like that when we can have the Tamil lifestyle?'<sup>73</sup> Tamaraj aims to secure his childrens' future by extending the number of tribals working for him beyond those of his own family.<sup>74</sup>

The key to his success is seen to be the ability to save. Tribals come to him for advice and occasionally loans. Others comment with a mixture of awe, concern and envy that, as the richest Irula, Tamaraj does not see why he should submit himself to community law. Not infrequently, Tamaraj challenges the unquestioned leadership of the headman, Karamadai. At times secured by supplies of alcohol, Tamaraj arranges tribals to support him and heckle Karamadai at village meetings. With support Tamaraj is able to alter decisions in his favour, leaving Karamadai increasingly isolated. Nowadays, challenges

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<sup>72</sup> A fairly natural desire one might add; in the case of the tribals, having material wealth and some degree of formal education also mean being less vulnerable to exploitation. The value of education in this regard, tribals are quick to point out, lies in the hope of getting a 'government job' (local-bureaucrat, with the Forest Department or as a guardsman of a bank for instance).

<sup>73</sup> Similarly, poverty is also put forward as a reason why tribals move to 'embrace' commodity-wealth. Poverty deprives them of the capacity to eat properly and clothe themselves, a situation which, they claim, makes them 'easy prey' to the monetary advances from middleman in return for poaching. The degree to which this story holds in Semmenarai is quite debatable. In actuality, the situation is more complex. It may however be true for the resettled tribals (Irula-Kasava, Jenu and Betta Kurumba, Sholegas) at the edge of the Mudumalai Wildlife Sanctuary in the northern Nilgiris, whose situation, until the early 1990s, was said to be one of near absolute poverty (hunger and malnutrition confounded by a dearth of labour opportunities). In Semmenarai by contrast the tribals have for several decades had access to a wide range of income sources and credit from NGOs, the state government and others eager to help them 'come up'.

such as Tamaraj's are not uncommon. "Those Irulas," it is reported, "who are working in the neighbouring plantations have been encouraged by their employers to contest the panchayat [village council] elections and these Irulas, because of their better economic position and official patronage, are able to win elections in open defiance of the established hereditary leadership" (TRC, 1987, 25). No doubt wealthy people had some influence previously in community decisions, but not more than the headman (cf. Mandelbaum, 1941, 21). This was in part because the headman himself was the 'wealthiest' in the sense of being strong, healthy, the good hunter, good at magic, having the number of cattle and otherwise able to draw upon crucial social relations in times of crises. Partly as a consequence of a shift in the notion of wealth, "nowadays, they [Irulas] do not depend much upon the tribal leadership due to their independent earnings" (TRC, 1987, 26).

*Visu: or rationalising custom?*

Visu, a 22 year old Kurumba, is an oddity among Kurumbas. Frequently found negotiating coffee and tea deals, he is a good organiser and is considered to have good business acumen. Whether it be NTFP trade or a honey-hunting expedition, Kurumbas know that he will 'get things done'. His manner of negotiation and organisation is bold and brash, something unheard of in the normally shy and reserved Kurumbas. Moreover, his knowledge of market transactions and bureaucracy make him the first port of call for those, even Irulas, seeking advice on loans, repayments and officialdom. At the same time, however, Visu's knowledge of, and interest in, the usual Kurumba customs is limited. At the beginning of the honey-hunting season, he no longer prepares according to custom, nor sings or even knows the honey-song and shows no interest in learning it. Referring to such customs, Visu explains that 'these are things from olden times. If your faith is right, you just go, pray and collect honey. Why do I have to do all these things?' Not knowing how to weave jungle vines into a climbing rope, Visu prefers modern tools (torches and ropes) for honey collection.<sup>74</sup> Disregarding the strict custom of only using bamboo sticks, never iron, to extract combs from cliffs (cf. Keystone, 1994, 51), Visu will sometimes use a knife,

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<sup>74</sup> Tamaraj also has little time for Keystone's 'Livelihood Programme' since traditional millets are for own consumption rather than sale, a sentiment echoed by other wealthier tribals.

<sup>75</sup> A feature also observed among other younger Alu and Jenu Kurumbas (the latter being from Masinagudi).

claiming on one occasion, that ‘it takes too long to cut a bamboo stick - if we are to take a jeep to Kotagiri market, we need to be quick’. While Visu may be an extreme case, over the last 20-30 years Kurumba honey-hunters of the Nilgiris have generally witnessed simplifications of the elaborate prayer ceremonies and a shortening or even dropping of the honey-song (ibid.), changes thought to be a consequence of rationalising and thereby ‘disenchanted’ the collection process.<sup>76</sup> Of course, this is not to say that all custom has been discarded. Most still strictly observe taboos - their significance resides not only in their symbolic meaning but also in ‘magic’ and are hence greatly feared if transgressed. However, it is noteworthy that the (more) educated young are seeking proof of cultural taboos (cf. Keystone, 1994, 78) whereas previously the authority of custom resided in tradition which itself remained unquestioned.

With a ‘mainstream’ (Tamil) lifestyle and outlook, not to mention market acumen, Visu stands in an ambiguous relation to other Kurumbas, appearing at times at the periphery of Kurumba society and at others, when the theme is economic and bureaucratic, at the core. In this respect he could be seen as a mediator between Kurumbas and mainstream society. But Visu also stands as a ‘liminal figure’ in more ways than one. He married a Sri Lankan Tamil which, according to custom, prohibits his wife from living in Semmenarai. Aptly perhaps, he chose to live directly in between Semmenarai village and the expatriate Sri Lankan Tamil settlement. Considered by some to possess the potential to be a future headman of the Kurumbas, Visu worked as a village ‘animator’ for Keystone, a teacher of other tribals in domestic honey processing and beehive maintenance when the NGO first approached Semmenarai. He has since left because, he claims, the pay is too low.

## (ii) Commodification and Freedom

One explanation for the re-orientation in tribal production and consumption as these cases make evident follows the official view on tribals, namely, that they have no choice but to live as part of Indian society. They therefore need to ‘come up’ quickly and should be

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<sup>76</sup> Such social transformation through rationalisation and commodification corresponds to what Bourdieu calls ‘disenchantment,’ an experience wherein the ‘economic function’ of an activity becomes recognised as distinguishable from its ‘social function’ by the agents of that activity (1979, 26-7).

helped. This view lends weight to the enthusiasm some show for the new lifestyle and aspirations as well as to the resignation (seen as laziness?) some, particularly older members, show to the direction of community development. While this explanation may shed some light on the changes, it still leaves in the dark the reason why it is that the new lifestyle is desired.

Considering the same issue with regard to new consumption patterns among the tribals (Muria Gonds) of Bastar, India, Gell suggests that “it is not money (self-love disguised as pseudorational accumulation) that motivates the consumption pattern [of the Muria]... but the impossibility of converting purchasing power into a socially coherent definition of self, in accord with ‘habitus’ handed down by tradition and inculcated during the socialisation process” (1986, 113).<sup>77</sup> The usefulness of Gell’s comments concern what they highlight by contrast with Semmenarai. For the tribals of Semmenarai, purchasing power *is* able to be converted into a socially coherent definition of self precisely because what was assumed to be socially coherent is now in question. Where once a notion of wealth was assumed, now it requires justification. The re-orientation of consumption and reconsideration of former assumptions that this implies, derives its own justification from the transformation that it effects, one that facilitates and enables ‘overcoming’ in general.<sup>78</sup> Since, by way of explanation, the primary reason NTFPs are gathered these days - for sale rather than subsistence use or barter - coupled with an increase in wage-labour and the general re-orientation of production for the market, suggests that consent has been given or elicited as to the identification of commodity-wealth with freedom and power (see below). If

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<sup>77</sup> In another scenario (fisherman in Sri Lanka), taking objects of exclusive consumption such as television sets for which there is no electricity, Gell argues that these kinds of wealth-signifiers ‘totalise’ the fisherman’s labour and social milieu. In other words, since the TV and the lifestyle with which the fisherman associates it originate outside the conditions in which his own wealth was created, by purchasing it, the TV serves to reconcile the totality of his life’s limitations. “He can turn all his labour, all this familiar messiness and uncertainty, into a smooth, dark cabinet of unidentifiable grainless wood, geometrically pure lines, an inscrutable grey glass face and within, just visible through the rows of little holes and slots in the back, an intricate jungle of wire, plastic and shining metal” (1986, 114). The purchase and the “leap of imagination” required for the purchase, Gell considers to be “a creative process,” as opposed to “dull unimaginative consumption” (ibid., 115). The point this analysis leaves unanswered, and one which will be taken up, is why it is that such an experience is desired in the first place - why is it necessary for the fishermen to ‘totalise’ their labour and social milieu in this manner?

<sup>78</sup> This line of argument shares a similar starting point with Martin’s attempt to explain the sudden and unsustainable increase in the volume of fur traded by Eastern Canadian Indians in the mid-nineteenth century. Martin’s contention was that the way of thinking, predicated on the insatiability of human needs and the

commodity-wealth were not or only distantly related to power and freedom, other attributes (hunting, wisdom, authority, maintaining convivial relations) would determine (and still do for the older generation) the lines according to which power and freedom may be acquired. Goods that were previously acquired through barter and mutual obligation, and social status hitherto acquired through shows of prowess in hunting and through the convivial reproduction of social relations are these days attainable through means of income generation.

It could of course be objected that the conclusion drawn here presumes knowledge of what are the tribals' concepts of freedom and power. In reply, it is suggested that these concepts - or at least that of freedom, which constitutes the central concern for the remaining analysis - may be evinced from a form of questioning derived from Hegel.<sup>79</sup> This form of inquiry involves an elucidation of the role of the 'horizon and the obstacle' or limiting factor in community life. For Hegel, the act of overcoming limiting factors that obstruct the horizon of possibilities constituted by a particular form of life or milieu is said to reveal the form of freedom present. As the agent's awareness of his/her form of life *as* a form of life increases (reflection usually engendered by exposure to a radically different milieu) - she begins desiring prospects and goods that lie *outside* her form of life (MacIntyre, 1967, 203). This milieu now appears to set limits on the agent. These limits, nevertheless, can play a positive role: overcoming or transcending them becomes the contemporary achievement of freedom. Hegel stressed the primacy of reflexivity in the attainment of freedom, the general presence of which is thought to mark the end of a form of life and the beginning of a new. For the very act of making explicit to themselves their own implicit conception of their essential 'mindedness' (*Geisteshaltung*) reveals to a people the limiting character of that conception, and in particular its inadequacy to the sense of their own freedom (cf. Talyor, 1975, ch.5). Accordingly, freedom is not considered an ahistorical property possessed by agents. Rather, what freedom 'is,' according to Hegel, is in each time and place defined by the specific limitations of that time and place and by the characteristic goals of that time and place. The methodological injunction that this view broadly suggests is 'understand a

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chronic insufficiency of goods, breeds a sort of 'economic seduction' rationale, with its corollary of 'primitive aboriginal technology,' where primitive is a synonym for inadequate (1978, 12-13).

<sup>79</sup> The author's reading of Hegel follows Taylor (1975) and MacIntyre (1967, 199-214).

community's life and thought in terms of their aims and goals and understand its aims and goals by means of identifying what people see as obstacles in their path'. One will then have identified their concept of freedom, even if the term freedom is not used in that connection.

Elucidating what could be considered the predominant 'limiting factors' for the tribals of Semmenarai prior to the 1950s we find those emanating from 'nature' such as wild animals,<sup>80</sup> diseases,<sup>81</sup> climatic irregularities disrupting crop growth and NTFPs; threats that were respectively dealt with employing available 'technology,'<sup>82</sup> tribal medicine<sup>83</sup> and by drawing upon food reserves in other settlements, from Badagas, or where feasible, from markets through coolie work. We also find threats from human conflict which, when from the 'outside,'<sup>84</sup> were met with the use of magic or in keeping with a semi-sedentary existence, avoided by moving to another area of the forest.<sup>85</sup> When internal,<sup>86</sup> conflicts were generally settled according to community law by the headman and village elders.<sup>87</sup> Today threats from wild animals and disease have decreased.<sup>88</sup> Human conflict today centres on immigrant settlers, particularly Sri Lankan expatriates<sup>89</sup> and forest guards.<sup>90</sup> Reporting of grievances to (caste) police seldom occurs as does the obtainment of NTFP collection passes from the Forest Department, due perhaps to the aforementioned fear. While in Semmenarai

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<sup>80</sup> Attacks on humans (tigers, bears, panthers, elephants), raiding of crops and disturbing drinking water sources.

<sup>81</sup> For example, malaria, cholera and typhoid.

<sup>82</sup> These were dealt with, albeit not always successfully, using traps, collective counter attacks, fire and so forth (Buchanan, 1870:I, 462; Thurston and Rangchari, 1987 [1909], 163-4).

<sup>83</sup> Using herbs, roots, nuts coupled with prayers and incantation (Thurston and Rangchari, 1987 [1909], 160).

<sup>84</sup> With other groups such as Badagas and Kotas, albeit infrequently.

<sup>85</sup> Organised warfare was unknown in the tribal Nilgiris (Mandelbaum, 1989, 10).

<sup>86</sup> E.g. suspicions over the employment of witchcraft or disputes between kin and neighbours over obligation and community law.

<sup>87</sup> Punishment was usually in the form of payment in kind. In more serious cases, the offending person's family were banished or threatened with witchcraft by the headman. Giddens employs a further less easily defined category of a 'fall from religious grace or malicious magical influence' (1990, 102) which, due to the constraints of the fieldwork, could not be investigated.

<sup>88</sup> In the Semmenarai area, threats emanating from 'nature' have decreased in frequency. Wild animals such as elephants and panthers are seldom seen these days, although a new source of anxiety is the increase of sloth bears in the area, attracted to honey from Keystone's beehives - an as yet unresolved issue. While disease is said to have decreased due to vaccinations (Mandelbaum, 1989, 17), so it appears has the daily nutritional intake. Elders complain that the (purchased) diet of the youth - typically rice, dhal and betel leaves - diminishes their stamina. Few heed their call to return to more nutritional yams and tubers from the forest.

<sup>89</sup> Sometimes a result of immigrants cultivating tribal land.

<sup>90</sup> Reports of arbitrary harassment and arrests of tribals for allegations of poaching and grazing inside forest areas are widespread.

a few tribals, notably Tamaraj and Visu, are confident enough to hold their own with forest officials, in areas where sources of wealth are more scarce such as in Masinagudi in the northern Nilgiris,<sup>91</sup> tribals have formed a co-operative (IMMM), giving them a confidence in their solidarity to ‘hold their own’.<sup>92</sup> A new category of difficulties has arisen over the past few decades from the increasing reach of the market economy and government bureaucracy. Difficulties with monetary transactions and loan arrangements mentioned earlier (requiring documents and witnesses), face those who are illiterate and have difficulty saving for repayments. Since the language of these formal spheres (and indeed the Lingua Franca of the Nilgiris today), Tamil, is spoken only to an extent by the younger generation, those who cannot feel inhibited by and are effectively disenfranchised from the legal means through which grievances could be resolved or from wider market opportunities in which they may ‘come up’. Wealthy tribals such as Tamaraj whose children learn Tamil and English at convent schools and those with influence in matters of trade like Visu have overcome these barriers. The rest who cannot, argue that the state government (Tamil Nadu) should install an educated person to distribute loans and benefits to the community, one who knows the community well but who must be caste in order to gain the respect of the tribals. To a large extent, Keystone serves this function *de facto* as a mediator between legal and market matters and the local community. The manner in which obstacles prior to the 1950s were, and those currently are, overcome contain several important differences, with the earlier manner exhibiting four general characteristics of note. Firstly, ‘overcoming’ involves an extensive drawing on kin and other social relations. Central to the use of this option no doubt was the practice of sharing, a kind of collective insurance (Ingold, 1980, 144). Secondly, since invocation and worship of family and forest ‘deities’ is employed in most instances of danger and difficulty, ‘overcoming’ is characterised as a shared or relational rather than a purely individual achievement. Thirdly, internal conflicts were dealt with through common law as understood by community elders. While their judgements could, in theory, be questioned the law to which they refer could not. Fourthly, the identification of threats, particularly those emanating from nature (e.g. crop failure), were in terms of ‘what

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<sup>91</sup> On Figure 3.1, Masinagudi is situated at the edge of the Mysore Plateau of the Nilgiris, in between the Moyar and the Sigur rivers, north-west of Sholur.

<sup>92</sup> Jenu and Bettu Kurumbas, Irula-Kasavas and Sholegas.

went before' or broadly 'tradition,'<sup>93</sup> the authority of which required no external justification. Characterisation of certain difficulties according to 'tradition' thus simultaneously sanctioned certain tried and tested means of overcoming them. If the problem, for instance, of crop failure is not seen to be changes in soil fertility but the result of improper sowing rites,<sup>94</sup> the solution lies in proper (authorised) appeasement of forest gods. Today, these characteristics, whilst not absent, have receded in importance in the attempt to resolve contemporary difficulties.<sup>95</sup> Instead, the manner in which contemporary obstacles are overcome or at least dealt with is characterised predominantly by: (1) a reliance on extraneous 'technical' assistance (from NGOs, government); (2) one's means of income generation.

What constitutes 'freedom' is more radical than before. That traditional obligations, titles and sorcery are seen by some to inhibit the scope for 'coming up' and that community law is no longer considered (by some) adequate to deal with contemporary 'threats,' would appear to provide impetus for the acquisition of a more adequate set of references. Tamaraj's open challenge to the authority of community law - based solely on wealth, points to such a set. Correspondingly, that advice from elders, once a source of practical day-to-day wisdom, is often discarded as inappropriate: the suggestion in times of difficulty to keep to customs - to 'keep to the Kurumba or Irula way,' when custom is seen by some as restrictive (Chinnaramman) and by others as outmoded (Visu) is not exactly helpful; and that the general conferment of trust (as the corollary of the means of overcoming threats and dealing with risk), is placed, at least for those who are considered 'successful,' in NGO and governmental advice rather than 'traditional' explanation and in one's means of income rather than reliance on kin sharing,<sup>96</sup> lends weight to the contention that whereas previously barriers overcome were barriers on the horizon of possibilities of the 'former' social order, now these horizons themselves constitute the barriers that must be overcome.

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<sup>93</sup> This difficult word is taken in the broad sense of 'handing down knowledge or passing on a doctrine or disposition' (Williams, 1983, 318-9). See also 'Visu' and 'honey-hunting'.

<sup>94</sup> For instance the Kengarai Firewalking Festival for the Semmenarai Kurumbas or the Kujapani Mari Festival for the Irulas.

<sup>95</sup> Little can be said about the 'employment' of family gods and forest spirits in this study.

<sup>96</sup> This is of course not to say that traditional institutions are no longer trusted. The point is rather that in the face of difficulties of modernity trust is increasingly placed in spheres other than 'traditional'.

Freedom conceived of as overcoming the limitations and inadequacies of one social order, brings another (apparently) less limited social order onto the scene. What constitutes this new social order, what constitutes both its horizon of possibilities and limitations, is the dominant form of work - commodity production and exchange. Both positive and negative aspects can be seen in the acquisition of freedom in this manner.<sup>97</sup> It is 'positive' in the sense that it enables resistance to what is seen as exploitation by middlemen and Badagas born from a widened perspective on the old social order in large part because they also dwell within the new. Yet the very means of acquiring the new freedom requires the breaking up of the previous unity, since it depends upon a form of work largely incompatible with and indeed, assimilatory of the old form. The Badagas' shift from subsistence-barter to production for the market suggests that they too perceived their incompatibility. Herein lies the 'negative' content. The subsequent changing relationship with the Badaga from custom-bound barter to wage-labour and sale, generated an intersection enabling and, it would appear, later requiring a type of evaluative perspective toward worldly forms and themselves, an evaluative perspective derived from the predominant form of work.<sup>98</sup> Within the horizon of this form of this work, it is, one Keystone member lamented, 'their values that they start to judge themselves by'. The freedom is 'negative' since it is not so much a freedom-to-wealth, than a freedom-from-poverty, the (self)-designation of which initially arose from the new form of interaction with economically mobile Badagas, and later with Tamils. Even where money facilitates conspicuous or creative consumption in Gell's sense, the motivation is generally to be free of the stigmatisation of being tribal. But the designation of themselves as 'poor' must, if our earlier argument holds weight, have arisen with the concurrent decline of the idea that being materially poor was of no great consequence. And it was of no great consequence largely because 'freedom' was equated with things and relations other than the commodity-based.

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<sup>97</sup> See positive and negative liberty in Berlin's *Two Concepts of Liberty* (1969).

<sup>98</sup> See Kelly for a similar 'intersection' among Fijian Indian labourers (1992, 103). In addition, some are repelled from the new 'way of life' because of what it is doing to their community (alcoholism, indebtedness, loss of land and the forest-based way of life) but are attracted to it because of the new individual choice, prospects of gain and the need for recognition as being of value that it is said to facilitate. This attraction-repulsion relationship seems to come to the surface in a circle of desire and guilt. To desire something is, in its simplest form, to wish to possess it, to divest it of its foreignness. This assimilation, to make it one's own, is at the same time to make oneself more like the object, which, in the tribals' case, is to be made more like mainstream society. Hence, the guilt felt at the erosion of their distinctiveness.

In sum, shared assumptions about the justifiability of norms (e.g. of sufficiency), appear to have become increasingly contingent on their success or failure in resolving contemporary dilemmas, particularly the stigmatisation of being tribal and poor and the accompanying crisis of self-worth. Certain assumptions are seen as such - contingent rather than assumed - because of what appears to be an implicit 'collapse' over their consensus resulting in a general division between young and old, most notably over the assumption as to what constitutes wealth. This collapse arose partly from perceived inadequacies of certain traditional institutions with the result that new means of overcoming contemporary difficulties are sought, the identification of which (commodity-wealth, extraneous 'technical' knowledge) further undermines the authority of existing non-commodified, shared norms.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### *Conclusion*

By bringing to light, through commodification and motivational modes of analysis, the social consequences of extending commodity relations (e.g. a shift in the concept of wealth from use-value to exchange-value and an undermining of the norm of sufficiency), this study calls into question the appropriateness of the use of financial incentives to secure the participation of members of a (hitherto) largely subsistence community for conservation purposes. Revealing these social consequences in this manner, furthermore, highlights the relevance of the two modes of analysis to development-oriented community-based conservation (since adequately dealing with these consequences requires some understanding of commodification and motivational factors; see below). The scope for applying this twin approach elsewhere is considerable: wherever conservation and development policy eschews reflection on the context within which it operates, this analysis will be useful. However, its limitations should also be kept in mind. The first concerns the identification of stabilising forces against social change. Among those that the study could not properly address involved the role played by middlemen: their regular visits could serve to buffer tribals from the market forces of urban areas. Middlemen's sale of 'luxury' commodities to tribals by visiting Semmenarai may act as a disincentive for tribals to travel to towns to purchase such items (a reliance possibly reinforced by playing on tribals' sense of indebtedness). 'Short-circuiting' this relationship, as some NGOs attempt, may remove the disincentive and could actually accelerate commodification-driven social change.<sup>99</sup> A further limitation of the commodification-oriented analysis is that it tends to leave too little space for human agency. An (Hegelian) analysis of motivation attempted to mitigate this problem, but nevertheless still paints an incomplete picture. What a community's or a

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<sup>99</sup> For further examples of stabilising forces against social change see for example Bourdieu (1979).

people's aims and goals are do not always coincide with what a given individual holds to be important. Friendship, solidarity or humour may equally prove capable of motivating persons. These less tangible factors, while not the focus of this study are in principle by no means excluded from a commodification approach. The extent to which these factors were addressed, was, within the constraints of the study, the extent to which they contributed to its underlying interests, namely, to the issue of servitude and freedom in changing economic conditions.

### *Recommendations*

(1) Since it was argued that some traditional institutions are seen to be inadequate in dealing with certain features of 'modern' life, it follows that one approach could be to *increase the adequacy of tribal institutions*, sometimes called 'capacity building' (Alcorn, 1991), to help them articulate needs and cope with problematic features of modernity. One way of contributing to this is to promote traditional knowledge, practice and community law on the basis of their value to conservation objectives and subsequent role of providing an income (Clay, 1991; Cox and Elmqvist, 1991). The danger here is that when 'traditional' knowledge and practice receive their justification primarily in this manner, tradition tends to become justified "only in light of knowledge which is not itself authenticated by tradition" (Giddens, 1990, 38), the very opposite of tradition. As a result Giddens remarks, "justified tradition is tradition in sham clothing" (ibid).<sup>100</sup> If 'raising the adequacy of tribal institutions' is attempted, it is necessary to clarify what counts as success. It is (comparatively) easy to measure the success of biodiversity conservation or economic well-being, but cultural integrity? Such a question depends upon one's concept of culture and, as a consequence, it would appear vital to be clear about this if people-based biodiversity conservation and economic improvement in turn are to succeed.

(2) *Sangham building*. Since market freedom may come to mean freedom from traditional duties and obligations including from community law, to help ameliorate

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<sup>100</sup> Viewed from this perspective, one could take the anthropological enterprise itself to be (just) another way of objectifying the world. To talk about traditional knowledge as a third party is not to embody it. In order to

fragmentary effects on communities in transition, social development should precede economic development. This could, for instance, be in the form of a village, women's and youth *Sangham*,<sup>101</sup> a forum that may facilitate new forms of solidarity in times of change. Social development of this kind would be especially pertinent for communities subject to unscrupulous middlemen and money-lenders whose snares of deception and debt-creation may thrive on a community's increasing prosperity. Of course, sangham building by no means guarantees that a community will retain (or want to retain) its integrity, but it should at least provide a platform upon which the direction of community development can be influenced by voices and values other than those solely economic.<sup>102</sup>

(3) 'Politicising' the community in this manner could also provide a basis upon which to encourage *shifting the concept of wealth by re-orienting production from exchange-values to use-values*.<sup>103</sup> Adopting this approach, as indicated earlier, will require rethinking the type of incentives NGOs offer. In addition, the orientation of questions regarding incentives should shift from 'what do you want?' to 'what kind of future do you want?' Questions about the future place answers to questions pertaining to present 'needs' and, moreover, the consequences of those answers in a wider context of political choice. Choices made on the basis of a short-term perspective could bring entirely unforeseen and potentially undesirable consequences in the long-term. In a very real sense, the appeal to freedom from localised constraints that commodification offers may well lead to a future in which possibilities are confined to predetermined options. The point is to clarify the potential consequences of extending commodity relations, a dialogue which could be supported by the Sangham.

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'get close' to what is embodied, however, one could perhaps replace 'traditional' with 'living' and thus take Giddens one step nearer: 'justified living knowledge is dead knowledge'.

<sup>101</sup> Sangham means 'community' in Hindi, and like the English word, is used both in a narrow and in an extended sense as in, for instance, an 'academic community,' where community could be interchangeable with league or fellowship of interests. It is an extended sense that the term Sangham is used here.

<sup>102</sup> In Semmenarai, this could proceed firstly with the establishment of a women's Sangham. In the Masinagudi area for instance, this has proceeded fairly successfully by encouraging at the beginning 6-10 'industrious' women to put into a group pool a small amount of their weekly income. Over the course of 6-12 months, this has enabled joint purchases - a community well, clothing and books for children and improvements to the village temple - achievements that have both raised their esteem in the eyes of village menfolk and raised the latter's interest in forming their own Sangham. It has served as a forum to discuss and forge solutions to common problems such as sexual abuse and beating. Significantly, the solidarity of the Sangham has increased the confidence of normally shy and easily intimidated tribal women to 'hold their own' when dealing with the likes of forest officials and petty bureaucrats. (John pers. comm.; cf. MYWA 1993).

<sup>103</sup> The general aim is to decouple the equation of freedom with commodity-wealth by offering alongside alternative sources of 'wealth' (see below and Illich, 1978, Gorz, 1980).

Since, as was argued, the need for recognition provides much impetus for tribals to more actively follow the ‘mainstream’ lifestyle, but one that has correspondingly decreased tribals’ regard for their own way of life, a counter point to this could be to *recognise tribals’ values and modes of valuing as being valuable in their own right.*<sup>104</sup> This recognition would greatly aid shifting the concept of wealth but requires a corresponding re-orientation in the NGOs concept of wealth. For unless the NGO re-orientates its concept of wealth, how can it expect and help tribals to?

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<sup>104</sup> Esteem for tribals could be raised by those who hold them in low regard and whose recognition they desire for instance by honouring tribal medicine and ecological knowledge at a district level. Supporting non-commodifying ways of valuing, furthermore, may also be conducive to ecological embeddedness (and thus supportive of conservation objectives) because care is generally fostered toward things that can be valued in themselves, rather than valued primarily as a means of generating cash.

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