

**Situating Adivasi Identity: Castes and Tribes of the Palni Hills in Tamil Nadu, South India.**

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To be “indigenous” in general and to have “indigenous knowledge” in particular have become intensively debated in recent years. In India this discussion has often been focused on questions related to the rights of local people versus the State, especially highlighted through national or state-ran projects like dam constructions, forest management and protected area management. One of the reasons behind this controversy is that the concept has become heavily politicized and the claim of being indigenous, or the Indian equivalent *adivasi*, is often used as an argument for enhancing the negotiating force of some groups in relation to other groups. In other words, the identity as indigenous has a significant capacity of boundary creation, promoting a view of those who “have” and those who “have not” rights in relation to political and economic issues.

In 1994 the Tamil Nadu Government declared about one third of the Palni Hills in Tamil Nadu as a sanctuary (Tamil Nadu Forest Department 1994). Although not yet implemented in practice, the eventual sanctuary and its socio-economic consequences have brought in new views of land use, thereby making room for new kinds of arguments and strategies in the ongoing negotiation over resources in the area. While the main aim of a sanctuary is to protect the flora and fauna for a broad range of reasons all aiming at “future use”, local people usually feel that something of a more “immediate use” is taken away from them. Often local people look upon the notification of national parks and sanctuaries as a continuation of a state policy beginning in colonial time with the declaration of state controlled forest areas. However, sanctuaries in contrast to national parks, gives room for limited and controlled use by local people of certain resources within the boundaries of the protected area, opening up a space for negotiation between local people and the state. In the last decade a discussion promoted by certain environmentalists in India has also started with the aim of widening this negotiation space further, introducing the idea of Joint Protected

Area Management (JPAM), including the possibility of making local people part of the management of national parks (Kothari et al 1996); Saberwal et al 2001).

In the light of this discussion and the increasing use of an identity as “indigenous” as part of negotiations over resources in India, I will place this debate at the local arena of the Palni Hills, an area I have been following closely since the beginning of the 1990s. By situating the notion of indigenous/*adivasi* locally my aim is two-fold. The first aim is to give a more sensitive account of the way local people look upon their relation to the physical environment, views that to a significant extent influence the political processes concerning their relation to each other, to the government and state policies, as well as to non-governmental organisations working in the area. Secondly, by putting the local perspective in the forefront my suggestion is that some of the controversies concerning the otherwise often internationally laden use of the notion “indigenous”, with its tendency of increasing competition in political processes, may be avoided.

The strong boundary-creating capacity of the concept “indigenous peoples” and the linked notion of “indigenous knowledge” have given me reasons to focus on two important interrelated aspects. First, and one of particular interest concerning discussions about national parks and sanctuaries, is the content and distribution of indigenous knowledge. Second, by looking at the relation between claims of *adivasi* status and its relation to actual forest use, discuss the implications of government forestry policies. Before taking these aspects into consideration it is necessary to give a short description of the local area in question, the Palni Hills of Tamil Nadu.

### **The Palni Hills and its people**

The Palni Hills is an eastern offshoot of the Western Ghats, the mountain chain running along the boarder between Kerala and Tamil Nadu, the southernmost states of India. These mountains dramatically turn the vast dry plains stretching out from the Bay of Bengal in the east into moist tropical forests and steep hills in the west, with peaks reaching more than 2500 msl. People have inhabited these hills as far back as we know, but they have also attracted the immigration of caste people from the plains, both for refuge and labour. In addition to this the forests have been exploited of their resources by other outsiders, and been an important divider in the formation of political structures in South India.

The combination of inaccessibility and marginality in relation to colonial and modern Tamil politics and at the same time its attraction as a place of material, cultural, as well as aesthetic value, have made the Palni Hills a highly contested arena of knowledge,

ideas and preconceptions. The remoteness made large parts of the hills escape from the most destructive measures of forest exploitation. This fact saved the flora and fauna of the Palni Hills to such an extent that during recent times when “environmentalism” has become a powerful political catchword the support for environmental protection of the areas is very strong. The remoteness also saved many of the forest people from central social engineering, and still a majority of them collect and hunt traditional forest foods. Parallel to this development the area has been, since the nineteenth century, an object of commercial forestry and plantation agriculture, the last including cardamom and coffee, and later on, among others, silk cotton and lime. Not only did the new economy pull new caste groups as labourers into the hills. The increased attraction of hill stations as holiday and tourist spots for Indians has, since the 1970s, made tourism a flourishing economic industry. More than one million visitors reach Kodaikanal, the hill station of these hills, each year, and is today only outnumbered by the most popular Hindu pilgrim temples in South India.

The flora of the forests exhibits a considerable variation due to the wide range of microclimate, peculiar physiography, topographic features and altitudinal and biotic influences, which has contributed to the presence of almost all important forest types of south India in the Palni Hills. These forests are also the home of the wild relatives to a number of economically important plants like banana, pepper and cardamom. The wildlife is still plentiful, including elephant, gaur, leopard, and occasional spotting of tiger, although several of the bigger mammals have had to face a dramatically shrinking habitat. We can also find endemic species like the Giant Grizzled Squirrel and the Nilgiri Thar.

The people of the Palni Hills and their economy have always been directly based on this physical environment. It still applies whether we talk about hunting and gathering, animal husbandry, agriculture, forestry, or the contemporary tourism industry. While these diverse economic activities have all been governed by the notion of “environment exploitation”, apart maybe from hunting and gathering, the declaration of a Palni Hills Sanctuary in 1994 introduced the contrasting view of “environment conservation”.

Only two groups of the people populating the Palni Hills today claim descent from the area, the Paliyans and the Puliyanas, respectively. Later immigrants confirm this, as well as early British records (Nelson 1989). The Puliyanas were once the agriculturalists of these hills, cultivating dry grains like *tennai* and *ragi* for their own subsistence. During the sixteenth and seventeenth century they were overrun by people from the plains, escaping from violence, famine, and epidemic diseases during the wars between state-building forces in the plains (Nambiar 1966: 8).

### **Protected areas and indigenous knowledge**

In the discourse around conservation and protected areas like national parks and sanctuaries and the idea of “participatory conservation”, in contrast to an “exclusionist policy” (Saberwal et al 2001) indigenous knowledge and especially what is often called “traditional ecological knowledge” is held in high regard (Grenier 1998). This kind of knowledge is supposed to be localized to specific geographical areas and its core objects the local flora and fauna. If this would be the main criterion for defining a group of “indigenous peoples” in the Palni Hills, the obvious candidate would be the Paliyans. Classified as “hunter-gatherers” in the anthropological literature (Gardner 1993; 2000; Norström 2003), they collect more than 60 edible plants and many more of medical purposes, where the staple food has been different species of wild yam (*Dioscorea*) found from the foothills up to the shoals at around 2000 msl. They hunt game like deer, wild boar, monkey, squirrel and lizards, and catch fish and crabs in the small mountain rivers, and collect honey from several bee species (Gardner 2000: 33-61; Norström 2003: 20-26). When asked they will refer to this kind of subsistence with the words “We eat wild yam, honey and monitor lizards”, referring to the most valuable and relished items of forest foods. Many Paliyans have been able to turn this knowledge into an important economic asset in relations to outsiders by collecting non-timber forest produce for the regional markets in the surrounding plains. This pursuit dominates the economy for some Paliyan groups (Norström 2003: 62-70; Schmidt 1997). While most Paliyans since many decades are involved in wage labour, their hunting and gathering is still vivid and an ongoing practice. Out of the about 40 Paliyan groups in the Palni Hills (a population of about 4,000 individuals), only two groups claimed in the 1990s that they do not use any forest resources any more. Their closeness to the forests is also manifested in their settlement practice and migration pattern. In spite of a tendency of “moving out” of the forests due to the increasing commercialisation of forest areas, no Paliyan families have shifted into urban areas or moved into the surrounding plains (Norström 2003).

To what extent is this knowledge and interaction with the environment only confined to the Paliyans in the Palni Hills? The Puliayans (about 15,000), the other group who descends from these hills, in spite of their former identity as swidden cultivators and today’s identity as farm hands and farmers, often claim extensive knowledge and interaction with the forests. In my fieldwork in the 1990s many Puliayans have given me extensive descriptions and demonstrations of plant species used as forest foods, including both tubers, greens, mushrooms, fruits, berries and plants for medical purposes. They can easily find wild yam on

request, and say that they sometime turn to this source as a food complement. Hunting was common earlier, but due to government restrictions they claim they avoid it today. In some areas they are also involved in the collecting of non-timber forest produce, although it plays a minor role in their economy compared to the Paliyans. Another reason for the Puliyan to emphasize their closeness to the forests has to do with their myth of origin. This myth states that in the old days the Puliyan were also hunters and gatherers, as the Puliyan and the Paliyan are one and the same people, born out of the same mother, as big and little brother. This myth is also acknowledged by some Paliyans, and especially so among those Paliyans living as neighbours to the Paliyans (in the area of Lower Palnis). While the Paliyans and the Puliyan both consider the Palni Hills as their place of origin, it is a different matter with the hill castes who today dominate the rural areas of the hills. They all claim descent from the plains, but anyway have strong relations to the forests, as their villages and cultivations, since their arrival to the area several hundreds of years ago, often is surrounded by forests without road connections. The only means of transportation are by foot or the use of donkeys and horses. The history and lives of these groups, including the Puliyan, is yet to be written, so my information is very scanty, and only confined to the Mannadiars, the biggest hill caste of the area.

Narayanan, a middle-aged man from Vellagavi, a Mannadiar village situated isolated on a ridge on the southern slopes, who I worked very closely during my fieldwork with the Paliyans, disqualified the common Tamil caste idea of the border between the village as the “controllable” and the vulnerable periphery (where the guardian deity attacks those who cross it in darkness), in this case the forest, the uncontrollable (see Daniel 1987: 61-79), with the following words:

For us in the hills it is different. We sometimes collect greens and herbal plants from the surrounding forest. We even worship trees and our Gods are in the forests as well, which they protect. We are not afraid of the forest because we are depending on it. From there we get fruits like *ambla* and *kadukai* and *sambiram* (incense). Actually it was our Gods who told us to settle down in this forest area. We ran away from the wars in the plains our Gods and Goddesses directed us to these places, showed us the streams in the forest for water and where we should place our temples and houses for protection. That is why you find our places high up on the ridges and inside the forests today.

The Mannadiars used to have herbal specialists within their communities, using their knowledge for treating their own people. Narajanan's mother is a good example. Narajanan himself has inherited this knowledge from her, and combine it with ayurvedic medicine and other forms of healing, today treating people from all over Tamil Nadu by using his forest knowledge.

The above examples, although briefly described, indicate that there is no absolute divide between "tribes" and "castes" when it comes to the knowledge of the flora and fauna, or their respective relation to the forests over time in the Palni Hills, although the content and distribution within each group may vary. In what way then are relations to the forests claimed and recognized?

### **Forests and identity**

When the British in the nineteenth century made the distinction between Reserved Forest Land and Revenue Land, they created a clear demarcation between those peoples supposed to fall within the forests and those supposed to be kept out. The Puliyan at that time, who worked as farmhands, and even serfs, for the Mannadiars and other hill castes, were simply identified with cultivation and should therefore live outside the Reserved Forest boundary, in the same manner expected of the Mannadiars and other hill castes. Their interaction with the forests was basically ignored. This fact, as part of argument, later changed the notification of the Puliyan from Scheduled Tribe to Scheduled Caste by the Tamil Nadu Government in the 1970s. The forest boundary implemented by the government was no major obstacle in the early days as the "forest boarder" at that time was very difficult to uphold. At the same time the government adjusted to their main objective for controlled cultivation by notifying areas around the caste settlements as Revenue Land open for cultivation. Mainly the same boundaries are in use today. Today though, with an increase of population and changing cropping patterns there is strong pressure from the local people to adjust these boundaries. Encroachments (cultivation) inside the forests are rather common, although seldom permanent, and claims to build roads through the forest are strongly advocated by the isolated villages to break their relative isolation from the local markets. The last comes in direct conflict with the authorities ideas of forest-land use as these roads by necessity needs to be built through large tracts of forests, as well as opening up the areas for further encroachments. This is why the government still hesitates to build roads to villages like Vellagavi, Periyur and Chinnur, although some new minor roads have been constructed, the latest in the 1990s to Adukkam and Ahagamalai.

In spite of these forest boundaries, the Puliyan have always kept a certain attachment to the forests. Because most of them are landless they have often turned to cultivation within the Reserved Forests, often coming in sharp conflict with government regulations. This conflict culminated in 1997. In this year many Puliyan settlements and cultivations were attacked by the Forest Department with hired men (totally more than 500). Houses were set on fire, rifle butts were used to beat up people, and 17 men were arrested (IWGIA 1998: 282). Due to these conflicts many Puliyan organised themselves into the Palni Hills Liberation Movement, linking up to the nationwide Indian Conference of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples. The Puliyan in the Palni Hills have taken part in rallies to Chennai (the capital of Tamil Nadu), and Dindigul (the district headquarter) to highlight their issues together with other Scheduled Tribes over the last 15 years. They are demanding to be re-notified as Scheduled Tribe and have even voiced “self-rule” for tribal areas. Although the Puliyan as well as the Paliyan are generally identified by outsiders as *adivasi* in the Palni Hills, the imposed meaning of *adivasi* is here used to demarcate a stigma of inferiority in relation to the surrounding caste groups. However, the increasing politicisation of the Puliyan have become a way for them to re-formulate this ascription, and to be an *adivasi* today has become “an important mark of identity and consciousness of the people, an identity that evokes a sense of self-esteem and pride rather than a sense of lowly and inferior society that often goes with terms like tribe or tribal” (Xaxa 1999).

Another event showing that the Puliyan do not agree with outsiders’ definition of their relation to the forests took place in the valley of Siruvattukadu in 1995. In this valley the Palni Hills Conservation Council (PHCC), the major environmental organisation in the Palni Hills), as part of their increasing social involvement in this valley, discussed with the local Paliyan to start a non-timber forest produce co-operative. The PHCC board had two reasons for pushing this issue. First they wanted to regulate this kind of collecting, as it was thought to be done in a non-sustainable way under the ordinary Forest Department’s contract system. Secondly they wanted to secure this asset solely for the Paliyan, as the latter were the economically disadvantaged group in the valley, and in the board’s view had the traditional rights to the forests. This was strongly rejected by the Puliyan in the valley. They had also been involved in the collecting of non-timber forest produce under the contractual system since its introduction in the 1960s and could not accept to see this important asset drift away. They claimed their rights to these resources and demanded to be included in the co-operative. The Paliyan hesitated to such cooperation as the Puliyan were politically dominating the

valley (here many Puliyaans have their own land since the 1960s) and due to this conflict the government contractual system is still in work and the trial of co-operative failed.

While the relation between caste groups and the forests of the Palni Hills were regulated by the government, starting in 1882 with the introduction of the Madras Forest Act, declaring large forest tracts as Reserved Forests, the situation for the Paliyaans have been significantly different. The British classified from the outset the Paliyaans as a forest people, where “the forest have been their home from time immemorial (Thurston 1909: 463), in contrast to the Puliyaans who “have always been the praedial slaves of the Kunuvans (Mannadiars)” (ibid: 464).

In the earliest written account of the Paliyaans in the Palni Hills, the Jesuit Fr Dahmen, running the St. Michael’s Estate at the turn of the nineteenth century, captures well the outside view of the Paliyaans:

...they avail themselves of the first opportunity to slip back into the jungle and enjoy once more the free and hazardous life in the woods. From those that remain all that has been obtained so far in the way of labour is to work about two or three days in the week, the other days being generally spent roaming idly through the forest or lazily reclining in their huts. The almighty rupee, that powerful incentive to the industrious Tamilian’s activity, is no allurements to them; coercion is no avail either, as the safe retreat of the woods is near at hand. (1908: 20)

The introduction of forest regulations did never affect the Paliyaans in any direct sense. Their staple food was wild yam, and their hunting was mainly small game, forest resources of little or no concern for others. The Paliyaan’s use of trees for hut construction, food extraction and household implements were restricted to small trees. Their low number, semi-nomadic life-style, and the habit of staying in the more inaccessible tracts of the hills, made fall outside state concern, leaving them with a high degree of autonomy. This autonomy however, was not the result of any regulation between the Paliyaans and the government. It was a relation based on what James Woodburn calls “autonomy by default” (1979: 248), where the administration, for their own convenience, did not bother too much about the Paliyaans as long as they did not come into conflict with government objectives. This situation has prevailed up to today. While the Forest Department staff anyway could harass the Paliyaans, many of them usually

avoided outsiders by hiding. In an interview with Kappan in 1993, an older Paliyan man from the northern slopes, he referred back to his younger days in the 1940s:

In that period we did not get these matchboxes (showing a matchbox). Our group of people made fire with the help of *vengakallu* (flint stone) and cotton from the forest (the floss from the wild silkcotton tree, *Bombax malabaricum*), which was ignited. We lived like that in the older period. We disappeared when we met strangers, because of fear. If you had come in that period, we would have run away, one after the other. It is only now that we are talking to people like you. Earlier you could not find anyone. Not even I could find other Paliyans if they were hiding and the Forest Department for sure could not find us.”

The authorities “default” attitude against the Paliyans prevailed after Independence and is still common. This has become especially clear over the last decades, when many Paliyans have changed their ambitions and strategies. The most obvious change among the Paliyans is a shift from semi-permanent settlements to permanent villages of their own, or in some cases mixed villages together with caste groups. Usually such a shift among groups of hunter-gatherers in India has been pushed by state-run settlement schemes. However, in the Palni Hills no such centralised scheme has been introduced. This fact has given room for a high degree of local initiatives and variation. In this process though, intermediaters in the form of local caste leaders, benevolent landowners, non-governmental organisations, or individual local government officials, have been instrumental to push the authorities to oblige the Paliyans’ ambitions of creating villages of their own. The last village established in this way was at Manjalar Dam, at the southern side of the hills in 2003, but still many Paliyans live in small sibling groups dispersed in the forest areas.

### **The changing notion of *adivasi*: Some concluding remarks**

While the notion of *adivasi* has been applied in India since at least the early twentieth century, mainly to describe the tribal groups in contrast to the dominant society, with the internationalisation of the term “indigenous peoples” during the 1990s, the notion of *adivasi* has been filled with a new content, thereby becoming highly contested and questioned (Betuelle 1998). Adopted by the UN in the ILO convention No. 107 and revised in 1989 (No. 169) the definition of indigenous peoples has been focused on the idea of “original inhabitants” of certain areas. While this can be rather easily applied in the so called “settler colonies”, as the Americas, Australia and New Zealand, with their recent history of conquest,

immigration and colonisation, the discussion in India has pointed out a much more complex historical process of population movements, and where it is not, in many cases, easy to identify the original inhabitants. Even the case of the Palni Hills indicates this fact, as all the mentioned groups above have several hundreds of years living in the region. Another argument used against the international way of using the indigenous identity is by referring to the significant difference in culture and social system among “indigenous peoples” and the dominant society. While this is more obvious in the recent colonised societies, the people of India have shared more or less the same territory for thousands of years, where the groups we today identify as tribes and castes, respectively, have to a great extent been constituted in relation to each other, and where the boundary between them has changed over time and from one region to the other. As we have seen, this is also the case in the Palni Hills, where, for example, the Puliyaans during the twentieth century first was classified as a tribe and then later as a caste, and today wants to be re-classified as tribe.

Does this way of reasoning disqualify the claims of those promoting an indigenous/*adivasi* identity? I would not like to think so. The more the notion of indigenous becomes politicised, the more we need to look into contents and reasons behind such claims. A paradox here is the fact that the strong “son-of-the-soil” theory applied by the dominant regional communities in India, most prominently manifested in the linguistically defined states, creating a strong feeling of a particular homeland, as Tamil Nadu, meaning “the Land of the Tamilians”, is often denied the tribals. The lack of recognising such rights and privileges, and the absence of power to promote these issues, give tribal groups reason to form new identities (Xaxa 1999). In the case of the Puliyaans their history of being serfs to landowning caste people and their landless situation even 60 years after the independence of India, have given them ample reasons to turn their forests in their surroundings to be able to live a decent life.

The Paliyaans are still more or less ignorant of the new kind of *adivasi* identity growing since the 1990s among tribal groups all over India. The main reason has probably been that they still have been able to use forest resources without the intervention of outsiders, including the authorities. Further, an *adivasi* identity is based on the underlying principle of group identity and this is still very weak among the Paliyaans because the relation between a hunting and gathering economy and social relations do not need an organisation above the family level.

Forest resources are collectively owned and individually procured, leaving room for an extremely high degree of individual autonomy (Norström 2003), described by anthropologists as the lowest level of social integration (Steward 1963: 101), with a fluid condition (Misra 1969: 201), and a fragmentary nature of group structure (Morris 1982b: 102), permeated by an individual autonomy syndrome (Gardner 1991). Denigrating authorities and solving conflicts through fission (voting with their feet), have created a lot of frustration among landowners, non-governmental organisations and local authorities. The Paliyan elusiveness, “they come and go as they want”, as farmers use to formulate it, “we do not like unnecessary words”, as the Paliyans will formulate it, results in the fact that the temporary group of Paliyans cooperating with outsiders, slowly fragments, one leaving after the other. The main prerequisite for these actions among the Paliyans is the possibility to still be able to procure forest food without the negotiation with others. However, with the increase of Paliyan villages, wage labour, and farmland of their own, they are now on the way to change these strategies. In this rather new situation they often fell ignorance from those in power, making many of the Paliyans feeling inclined to join the spreading *adivasi* movement in the hills.

When (if) the Palni Hills Sanctuary becomes implemented, with the planned area of 900 square kilometres, a third of the total area of the Palni Hills, it will change the circumstances for all people in the region. After all, so far the notification of protected areas in India has mainly resulted in the increased power of the state. If the authorities and environmentalists do not recognise the different claims the local people have on the same area, drawing from their self-identification mentioned above, the authorities and environmentalists invite an even stronger adherence to *adivasi* identity and boundary creation than otherwise may be called for. Even caste groups like the Mannadiars will not be silence as their villages and farms will also be circumscribed by the sanctuary boundaries.