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Development vis-à-vis Degrowth: Stories of Resistance, Struggle, and Survival from the Postcolonial Western Ghats

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Abstract

One of the eight “hottest hotspots” of biodiversity according to UNESCO, the Western Ghats have much to be credited for the historical prosperity of western peninsular India. The colonial era marked the beginning of the ecological diversity of the forests of the Ghats, spawning new rules and policies in the state. The consequent land allocations posed a challenge to the community identity of the indigenous tribes of the region. Even after India’s independence, the native successors in governance and land ownership inherited the capitalist and imperialist policies claiming to reduce poverty through development. The rampant growth strategies and the unpredictable climatic variations with a cycle of drought and torrential rain further threatened the ecological stability and also pushed the native tribes into destitution and displacement. This paper attempts to analyze literary works chronicling the tribal lives of the Western Ghats alongside social narratives on the recent harsh adverse effects of unsustainable growth in southwest India. The acclaimed novel *Kocharethi the Araya Woman* brings to the fore powerful statements of race and land rights of the Arayar community against the backdrop of the Western Ghats. The woes of the Badaga population of the Nilgiris amidst development interventions are core to the novel *When the Kurinji Blooms*. The paper attempts to read how the poignant narratives from the Western Ghats are a clarion call to redefine development through a broader cultural process of decolonizing the growth paradigms.

Keywords: Western Ghats, Climate change, Development, Degrowth, Forest

Introduction: Locating indigenous fiction in the Anthropocene

The times we live in are marked by unprecedented economic growth not ever witnessed in history, along with evident signs of environmental degradation. The onset of the

Anthropocene era and the attempted alterations of the planetary ecosystem induced by the relentless increase of man-made activities open a new chapter of remedies and negotiations at national and international levels. While the multifaceted ecological breakdown of the century is attributed to human beings, the economic system that demands continuous growth while benefiting a small minority of people has to be probed in order to think beyond the general narratives of the Anthropocene (Moore, 2015). To tackle climate change and the overshooting of planetary boundaries, it has become desirable to contemplate 'degrowth' strategies, an approach that can be ecologically sound. Degrowth is a planned reduction of energy and resource throughput designed to bring the economy back into balance with the living world in a way that reduces inequality and improves human well-being (Kallis, 2018; Latouche, 2009). The chimera of "growth" for development that changes ontological relations within the economically different strata of society is based purely on capitalist ideologies. According to Hickel (2021), excessive consumption in the Global North takes a toll on the Global South, disproportionately damaging its ecology. Dorninger et al. (2021) hold the same view on the irreconcilable relationship between the extractivism of the North and the ecological breakdown in the South.

The idea of the Anthropocene is endorsed by the former colonizing nations of the world, who anticipate that it will drown out their pernicious exploitation activities perpetrated across the globe, especially in the former colonies. Baker states that "by eliminating differences, histories of colonial violence, and the disproportionate burden of environmental harm felt by indigenous people is neutralised and therefore evaded" (2019, n.p.). Making all of humanity responsible for planetary change is a formidable generalization that erases the historical context that drove the earth's ecosystem to vulnerability. Underneath the seemingly uniform trajectory leading to the Anthropocene is the north-south divide, which is essential for maintaining an international socio-political, economic order that buttresses the imperial powers that continue to perpetrate poverty and environmental degradation even after the 400-year period of European conquest and settlement. The term Global South is more than just a word for underdevelopment; it is an allusion to decades of colonialism, neo-imperialism, and victimization suffered by its members, which incurs great inequalities in living standards, life expectancy, and resource utilization (Dados & Connell, 2012, p. 13). In the current environment of growing global inequities, the presence of "south in the north" and "north in the south."¹ complicates the notion of neocolonial and neoimperial authority.

The fall of the empires in the middle of the twentieth century left behind the erstwhile colonies in socio-political turmoil, and India was no different. Growth and development, as envisioned by governments and markets, did solve many problems in independent India, but these solutions proved to be neither exhaustive nor sustainable in the long run. Tens of millions of people have been displaced from their homes since independence to carry out economic modernization programs. As a result of the eviction and subsequent impoverishment, the indigenous tribes suffered disproportionately. The appropriation of land from marginalized and indigenous communities has led them to the impossibility of combating climate change, leading to drought and starvation on the one hand and the perils of natural disasters like flooding on the other. Such examples could be pointed out in different parts of the world.

With the ongoing land conflicts in neo-liberal India and the case of land grabbing/acquisition still being a pervasive one, a look back at the beginning of the

dispossessions in India in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries through literature makes us understand that the issue had been at the center of Indian politics from the colonial days. As India's growth slackened in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis, the then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh argued that the timely completion of infrastructure projects was a top priority, and the government's annual economic survey proclaimed "the urgent need to streamline land acquisition and environmental clearance" (Mehdudia, 2011, n.p.). On the one hand, when the government approves huge concessions in forest areas for massive projects, it leads to the eviction of indigenous communities based on the colonial forest conservation argument, wherein the local population is seen as a problem in preserving the forest resources. Being a polarizing issue, it is imperative to analyze the context, the actors, the victims, and their environments when India transitions from developmental dispossession—"land to produce"—to the new regime of neoliberal dispossession—"land for markets" (Levien, 2020).

The paper establishes a link between the colonial forest and land reform policies implemented under the pretext of sustainable development and degrowth in India and their impact on the lives and environment of indigenous communities in the rural South. Guha (1994) has already brought the workings of the Forest Department under scrutiny, demonstrating that various policies have excluded the interests of the tribals and peasants while backing the interests of a specific group of industrialists and urban consumers. The evolution of forest and state policies to date is significantly biased, squeezing the tribal and rural poor between destructive development and conservation processes. These socio-natural entanglements, visible only on the local level, contribute to the big-picture concept of the Anthropocene. When human-driven disruption of the Earth system is strongly debated, attempts to bring down the Anthropocene from the global to the local level offer a different standpoint and are widely accepted. This bottom-up approach, in addition to localizing the issue of the Anthropocene, can also adequately address the pressing issues of sustainability, equity, and climate justice that challenge human existence worldwide.

The paper proceeds from the conviction that postcolonialism, the development paradigm, degrowth, and indigenous communities have much to gain from one another. It delves into an early twentieth-century reading of two novels from the indigenous communities of the Western Ghats—Narayan's *Kocharethi: The Araya Woman* and Rajam Krishnan's *When the Kurinji Blooms*. *Kocharethi*, published in 1998 and originally written in Malayalam by Narayan, was translated by Catherine Thankamma in 2011. *Kocharethi*, from the pen of the first tribal novelist from South India, Narayan, is an authentic write-back to the dominating powers on how the state, the establishment, and organized religion marginalized the early inhabitants of the high ranges. The author belongs to the Malayaraya community in the hilly terrain of the Idukki district of the Western Ghats in Kerala. Set on the same premises, the work describes the trials and tribulations of the Malayaraya community in the early 20th century. The second novel is translated from the Tamil work *Kurinjithen* and published in 2002. Krishnan sketches the lives of Badagas in the Nilgiris in this novel, translated as *When the Kurinji Blooms*. Hailing from Tamil Nadu, Krishnan's fiction points to the early days when state-directed capitalism defended widespread dispossession as an unavoidable and necessary cost of development. In the hands of these authors, the mountains and valleys of the Ghats become more than a landscape—a living canvas on which stories of struggle, resistance, and survival are written. Recently recognized as one of the eight "hottest hotspots of biodiversity for the peculiar inhabitant species of the

mountains” (UNESCO, 2012), it is the ancestral home to 184 ethnic groups categorised as scheduled tribes, among which around 20 are identified as particularly vulnerable.

The readings of the selected fiction detail the expectations of economic growth and its failure stage in two different geographical settings, the range of social processes triggered in response, and the implications for the marginalized population. It raises critical questions about the plight of indigenous communities of South India aiming to relocate the idea of degrowth relative to the Global South and the experiences of these communities. It intends to explore how tribal communities challenge victimization in the framework of capitalist development, echoing voices of dissent against the mainstream development ideology.

Expropriation of the Malayaraya² Community

Discussions on inequality and social class divisions are often correlated by researchers with gender, race, ethnicity, and caste. The participation and judicious inclusion of Indigenous and tribal peoples in the growth spectrum is a declared objective of many national and international organizations. The United Nations and ILO have been the key organizations bringing forth declarations and conventions toward this objective. India has been a positive participant in these initiatives, but the nation has contested the use of the term “Indigenous Peoples” for a particular group, stating that all citizens post-independence are indigenous to India. For the forest communities deserving special attention, India has constitutionally provisioned the term “Scheduled Tribes” or “Adivasis”, translating to “first inhabitants”.

The Malayaraya community has a culture, lifestyle, and tradition that are distinct and unique in many ways. The community inhabited 18 holy hills in the Western Ghats, spread across present-day Idukki, Kottayam, and Pathanamthitta districts of Kerala state. They worship Lord Ayyappa (whom the community addresses as Sree Sabareesa) and hill deities for their spiritual sustenance. The leaders of the Malayaraya community have sustained the claim that the modern-day shrines of Sabarimala and three other nearby hills belong to their community. They were forcefully evicted from these holy sites in the 19th century by the upper castes (Abraham, 2018). The community is still engaged in litigation. There are vocal protests towards reclaiming their lost right to observe their rituals in the existing shrines, particularly the lamp lighting ritual during “Makaravilakku,” which is the key festival at Sabarimala that coincides with Makara Sankranti for the larger society (Thadathil, 2019).

The community had control over the entire ranges in the pepper belt of the Ghats along the Kerala-Tamil Nadu border before the infusion of ‘external’ forces who considered themselves the rulers of the hills. The Travancore Census Report (1901) details the Malayarayas as a

class of hill tribes, with their abodes on the slopes of high mountain ranges. Their villages are fine-looking, with trees and palms all around. They are superior in appearance to most other hill tribes but are generally short in stature. Some of the Arayans are rich and own large plots of cultivated grounds. They seldom work for hire or carry loads. (Thurston & Rangachari, 1909)

In *Kocharethi*, through the lives of its main characters, Kunjupennu and her husband Kochuraman, Narayan depicts the shifting landscapes of the hill people in their changing socioeconomic and cultural surroundings. The opening chapters of the novel emphasize the

Malayarayas' profound bond with the forest, painting a realistic picture of the way of life in which they cultivate and collect food while living in perfect harmony with their surroundings. They clear and level forest lands and cultivate paddy, along with pepper and other crops, for two seasons. Consequently, they clear another part of the forest for cultivating paddy. These instances demonstrate that the Adivasis were well-fed and knew what was best for them and their environment.

The novel sketches unpredictable climatic variations in the hills, with a cycle of drought and torrential rain often pushing the community into dire poverty. Their lives advance as they survive a period in which the valley and its environs are plagued by smallpox and a poor harvest of the crops. Drought strikes the Araya lands after the outbreak of smallpox. Though they could predict the changes in weather, the direction of the wind, the onset of rain, and the preservation of their food for more extended periods, especially during monsoons, there were "days when no fires were lit in the Araya homes" (Narayan, 2011, p.62). Despite the unpredictable climate and low yield, the Arayars do not consider exploiting the land in any way but instead contently take what the earth provides each season. The forest frequently catches fire in great heat, destroying their dry crops and the dwellings erected in the middle of the crops. Even though the neighbors rush to help, Kunjipennu's house catches fire, and both Kochuraman and Kunjipennu are severely burned. Kunjikuttan, their kid, perishes in the fire, leading his parents to become depressed. "[...] Arayar who had lost everything, even the clothes they had been wearing—looked at one another and wept" (Narayan, 2011, p. 61).

After the drought and the season of forest fires, Kochuraman and Kunjipennu replant pepper vines on their land and prosper as a result of their hard work and astute business decisions. However, there are other problems now. Kochuraman is robbed by the upper caste extortionists from Kanjar, the nearest town in the valley. The novel paints a horrific picture of many village thugs attacking and plundering the Araya men as they return to the hills with money earned from pepper sales. One of the characters in the novel, Kunjumundan, sells his pepper to a local trader directly off the vine. The readers' hearts are torn when Kunjumundan and his son get robbed and thrashed in a secluded room as a reward for selling the pepper. Realizing the tragedy that had befallen him, he wails, "Mothalali [Lord], I lost my pepper and my money and got beaten up. I do not want any more blows from those policemen" (Narayan, 2011, p. 105).

The traders, attracted by the cashew nuts and pepper they grow on hills, haunt the houses of Malayarayas for their hard-earned produce. But the Arayas hardly knew the modern means of measurement and, thereby, the value of their produce. "The poor Arayar! They toil hard on the land, but they don't know anything about weights; they cannot count or calculate. The merchants cheat them with their crooked weighing balance and weighing sticks" (Narayan, 2012, p. 102). Their way of life indicates a self-sufficient economy, with a large portion of their income derived from trading a portion of what they grew on the farm. However, these dealings resulted in unequal exchange and economic deprivation.

Preservation toward Eviction vis-à-vis Preservation toward sustainability

Despite the growing importance of degrowth to achieve global sustainability, there is a dearth of literature dealing with the forest sector from a degrowth perspective³. Few attempts have been made to relate the forest resource industry to the deforestation in India that began

in the late twentieth century, be it in pre- or post-colonial India. The first of the six principles of degrowth identified by Demaria et al. (2013) is ecology, which is based on the preservation of nature. It indicates that the forest cover should not decrease because it is the most apparent sign of sustainability. Against this background, the conservation rules and forest acts can be considered degrowth policies.

Conservation rules too had an adverse impact on tribals, as the forest regulations in India drafted and amended initially under colonial rule from 1856 on excluded tribals from rights to land and forest produce. The colonial authorities portrayed the indigenous tribal society as destroying and modifying the dense forest ecosystems of the Ghats as a means of bringing the territory under imperial control. Towards the middle of the nineteenth century, the British set forth to maximise their revenue and appointed a commission in 1850 to survey forests and reserves. The report prepared by the mandated committee presented the local people as destroyers of the forest ecosystem (Agarwal, 1985). With commercial considerations as the mainstay, a committee was formed to frame forest laws to assert state monopolies and exclude forest communities. A quickly constituted Forest Act was passed in 1865, enforcing the initial set of power relations in modern forest management and later becoming more regressive with the Forest Act of 1878. The latter had excluded the rights to forests and resources from the local population and transferred them to the state by demarcating them as reserves and protected forests. Consequently, the newly introduced concept of the reserve forest that emerged with this act alienated the tribals and other forest dwellers from their ancestral settings (Shiva 1993a). The enactment of the 1878 Act was decisive in giving the colonial government extensive powers to declare any forest land as ‘government land’, resulting in the preservation of forests and further reinforcing the regulation of forest users’ rights and privileges through the 1894 National Forest Policy (NFP) (Springate et al., 2007). The Land Acquisition Act of 1894 also came into force, whereby land could be compulsorily acquired for ‘public purposes.’ Since then, forest dwellers have been displaced under the pretext of one or another developmental project in various parts of the country, proving this act to be the most stringent (Springate et al., 2007).

The beginnings of the imposition of the forest policies on the Arayar community surface when Kochuraman visits the *kaanikkaran* (overseer) seeking permission to clear the tail-like stretch of forest adjoining his land. “You can’t clear the forest these days. That is what the ranger said” (Narayan, 2011, p. 85). There is also talk of the demarcation and boundary marking of forest land when he seeks the assistance of Arayars: “Kochurama, the forest officers will come after the tenth of the month of *Thulam*⁴. This year they will make the boundary. We need quite a lot of people” (Narayan, 2011, p. 86). Unknowingly, the tribals had started becoming part of the land, which was now measured, demarcated, and classified into several categories that might one day slip out of their lifeworld.

The Malayarayas had a burden of heavy taxes, being tenants on land originally belonging to Poonjar or Puniyat Rajas⁵, later seized by Marthanda Varma⁶ in the 1750s. They had to pay tax for the right to live on and cultivate their land, as it was owned either by the king, the feudal landlord, or the Brahmin zamindars and the British colonial administration at various stages of transition. They were compelled to pay *thalakaram*, or head tax, based on the number of persons in their household (Narayan, 2011, xxiv). The tax burden also forced them to part ways with their land ownership titles for exploitatively low prices. The *kaanikkaran* is entrusted with maintaining the list of trees in each Arayar territory under him and collecting and bringing the forest produce to the range office regularly.

Malayarayas derived their surnames from a tree or rock near their homes. Furthermore, any random forest ranger who came to count their heads to impose tax on them performed this ‘naming ceremony.’^[7] Hence the representation of the community completely relied on the whims and fancies of the forest ranger, which rendered them without an ‘address’.

During the mid-nineteenth century, there was a drastic change in the social and economic system when the Travancore government leased out large stretches of land to the European planters, causing a massive depletion of natural forests for teak cultivation. This had a negative impact on indigenous populations’ access to land resources as they were forcefully driven out to the inlands, limiting the places available to them for grazing their cattle and open defecation. Be it the colonial state, the princely state, or the temple authorities, they were all different projections of the colonial machinery that had come to expropriate the maximum from the Arayars. The forest guards demand tax and other payments from the Arayars, claiming that their land belongs to the Travancore King and the Lord Ayyappa temple, which are tax collection authorities. They direct the Arayars to collect the forest produce, and those who collect the most will be rewarded by the maharaja. There appears to be a forest official whose speech on tax evasion threatens the community. Many believe that his generosity is responsible for the lives of the Arayar and other tribal communities. Arguing that Arayar’s land is Travancore state property, the forest officials cut down major trees like rosewood and teak with such recklessness that they ruined Arayar’s farm and houses. Another character in the novel, Pattathil Kunjunni Pilla, the head of the Sastha temple and Devaswam, arrives with his men to collect taxes as a levy for ‘Lord Ayyappan’s land’ from each Arayan. He was claimed to have had rights bestowed upon him by the maharaja. “The hills and forests were Lord Ayyappan’s garden. The Arayar and Uralies were destroying the forests so they must pay compensation for it- one-third of the cash crops was to be given to Kunjunni Pilla, apart from what was contributed during the temple festival” (Narayan, 2011, p. 116). When Arayar’s contributions are minimal during the seasons of drought followed by severe rain, the cops and thugs whom Pilla sends unleash a reign of terror, saying that it is the wrath of Ayyappan on clearing the forest and polluting the place. Thus, the modern state and its agents victimize the Arayars.

The question of forests opened up an unending contest of power and politics, spawning many discourses of rule and protest in the colonial state. The initial colonial encounter with the unique and oldest ecosystems of the Western Ghats was an aesthetic fascination with the picturesque landscape of green grassy hills interspersed with tropical trees. John Daniel Munroe, a prominent figure in colonial Indian history, unexpectedly came upon these hill ranges on one of his long hunting expeditions (Idukki Plantations, 2016). Landscapes were seen as commodities, and members of an ecosystem were treated as isolated, extractable units (Polanyi 1957; Cronon 1983; Merchant 1990). Even Gadgil and Guha (1989, p. 177) conclude their fine study of forest conflicts in the colonial period by reducing those conflicts to “two opposed notions of property and resource use: communal control over forests being paired with subsistence [. . .] state control with commercial exploitation.”

The migrants in the plains befriend the Adivasi males, offering them toddy, arrack, and tobacco and transferring the lands on the hillsides to their names. Moving out from a life that hardly involved money issued by the state, the Adivasis are burdened with domestic expenses and debts. They alienate their lands and leave them to the use of non-tribals to make ends meet. “Kunjadichan [Kunjipennu’s brother] did not think that making a thumb

print was a serious thing. All he felt was tremendous relief - he was rid of the loan. Joyfully he pressed his thumb down on the paper” (Narayan, 2011, p. 69). The Arayars, who had never realized the need to keep documentation and records of ownership, lost all of their lands and were forced to work as laborers. The lack of legislation to prevent the transfer of land ownership to non-tribals was a sign of continuing apathy and the persistent callousness of successive governments in identifying and recognizing the indigenous people and their livelihoods. Landlords, businesspeople, and the police mercilessly take advantage of the community’s ignorance and lack of experience in modern ways of life. The lands of the Arayars are gradually and forcefully alienated as a result of this unholy alliance between the latter forces. Anyone who opposes is brutally subdued.

As against the oppressive forces of the modern imperial state, there are benevolent individuals who represent the better side of modern life. There is Krishna Pilla, who lends a hand to Arayar in every way he can. He tells the Arayar that the land on which they dwell is neither the King’s nor Ayyappan’s, and in fact they need not pay taxes on it. Krishna Pilla becomes the Arayars’ protector by assisting them in filing a court lawsuit against the extortion they experience from the “civilized upper caste.” Recognizing that the underlying reason Arayars are exploited is a lack of education, Krishna Pilla sends Kochupilla, an *aashan* (teacher), to Araya Hill to establish a *kalari* (village school) for the education of Araya youngsters. *Aashan* says to the Arayar: “They should study, become confident, wear good clothes, get government jobs [...]” (Narayan, 2011, p. 147). Considering the advice of *Aashan*, Kochuraman educates his daughter, Parvati, in the hopes of an improved life. Later, he becomes distressed when his daughter is too eager to get married after acquiring a job instead of assisting him, though he struggled a lot to educate her. Towards the end of the novel, with no one to take care of, Kochuraman and Kunjipennu flee from the hospital in fear of the impending surgery. The dreams of a new life are thwarted when, in the middle of the night, Kochuraman and Kunjipennu stand abandoned on the dimly lit road ahead of them that “seemed to go on and on, dissolving into the night” (Narayan, 2011, p. 207).

Several factors are involved in curtailing the ‘ownership’ and access rights of the indigenous people to forest land. The simultaneous processes of bestowing private property rights on the *janmis*^[8] and the widespread development of British plantations severely limited the privileges of the tribes. The Pattam Proclamation of June 2, 1865, was momentous in the creation of private property and encouragement of capital investment in cash crops and plantations, transferring full rights to the government tenants on due payment of the land revenue (Thomas, 2005). However, the illiterate Arayans could not take advantage of the changed policy matters. (Kjosavik & Shanmugaratnam, 2007). With the onset of colonization, Grove (2017) writes that the locally evolved character of man-land relations shifted toward direct private property status or direct state authority, resulting in a shift in ownership dynamics between people, forests, and other non-arable lands. This further led to a change in the self-sufficient economy and the mode of cultivation followed by the Malayarayas. Even after India’s independence, the infiltrations into the forest lands continued. In 1954, the then Thirukochi⁹ government, led by Pattom¹⁰, initiated settlement programs in the Western Ghats under the High Range Colonization Scheme. It was enacted with a specific end goal of controlling the mountain ranges, as the country was setting the stage for a linguistic reorganization of state borders. Additionally, due to extensive food shortages in the Travancore Kingdom in the 1940s, the government first granted exclusive cultivation rights (known as ‘kuthakapattam’) in state forest areas (Chandrasekharan, 1973). The majority of these properties were granted without a survey. As an aftermath, the high

ranges witnessed large migrations from the plains (Shivaswamy et al., 1945). Encroachments on the forest land had also increased during this settlement phase of 1940–65.

When adivasis wage a losing war to restore their land and cultural identity across India, the politically more advanced and materially more powerful sections of the population relentlessly continue their development activities, further undermining the independent and community-specific lifestyles of the various tribal populations. It is evident that under the guise of conservation, the tribes have been deprived of their livelihoods due to the state's forest protection legislation, while other forms of bourgeois forest-based businesses have flourished with the connivance of the government administrators. A sociopolitical and economic system that underwrites a capitalist growth ideology and undervalues indigenous sovereignty is a human rights violation. In the struggle for a future that values land, culture, and society, degrowth and indigenous rights should complement one another. In an interview appended to the novel, Narayan spells out, "We want to be understood ... and allowed to live with dignity" (Narayan, 2011, p. 208).

Badagas and Colonial Footsteps in the Hills of Nilgiri

The novel *When the Kurinji Blooms* by Rajam Krishnan is set against the backdrop of the Nilgiris in Tamil Nadu, during the colonial period. The hillocks of the Nilgiris, literally meaning "Blue Mountains, located towards the northwestern border of the state, are a point of convergence of the Western Ghats and the Eastern Ghats and are regarded distinctive for their climate and 'environmental peculiarity and individuality' (von Lengerke & Blasco, 1989, p. 62). The title of the novel foregrounds the glory of the hills that were once splendidly clothed in *kurinjis*, the purplish-blue flowers of delicate beauty unique to this ecosystem that blooms once every twelve years. The Badagas are the largest ethnic minority community inhabiting these hills. The mountains of the Nilgiris, where the *kurinji* blooms, are an intrinsic part of the collective psyche of the Badaga community, who reckon their age with the blossoming of the flower. The Badagas use the term *kurinji* (referred to as a *kurinji* span in the book) to denote a twelve-year period. Navigating the changing fortunes of Badagas, Rajam Krishnan narrates the impacts of urbanization on the tribal communities, the denudation of the luscious ranges of the Nilgiris, and the vanishing landscapes of *kurinji*, in the facade of modernization that permeates the hills, reflecting the country's social and economic development.

The literature on the Badagas in the Nilgiris is still beset with inconsistency and confusion over categorizing the group as a caste or tribe (Hockings 1968, 1993; Mahias 1997). There is also a notion that the Badagas are well aware of their uniqueness as a caste with their language, culture, and history of their ancestors' migration from the former Mysore region (Hockings 1968, 1993). He states that they do not fit into the traditional caste model in India (1980a), but accept themselves as members of the Backward Class, the title conferred by the Indian government, and hence culturally superior to other primitive tribes in the Nilgiris. Before the mid-nineteenth century, Davey states, a prime reason for the popularity of the Nilgiri hills was that each ethnic group of the Nilgiri hills had its own distinctive roles and duties, making them interdependent for products and services (2018, p. 12). Badagas were generalized as agriculturalists (Breeks 1873; Metz 1864; Thurston and Rangachari 1909). They traded the surplus grain at the time of harvest in return for other goods when the other tribes yielded only barely enough for their needs.

The story in the novel follows three generations of Badagas living in Maragathamalai over the course of fifty years: Lingayya, his son Jogi, and Jogi's son Nanjan, who graduates as an engineer and ushers in a new way of life. The narrative of Jogi depicts the loss of the hills' splendor and beauty with the gradual diminishing of *kurinji*. He is a true son of the soil and exemplifies a life of tenacity and moderation. On his return home after serving twelve years in the temple, he is deeply moved by the transition that has taken place all over the hills: "The *hatti* dwellers, till then, had cultivated samai, ragi and potatoes for their use and had not known that they could make money by selling them. They now worked on the land, planting tea, with the sole purpose of becoming rich" (Krishnan, 2002, Location No. 1939). Jogi's family, which adheres to tradition, faces hard times, whereas another family, the Kariamallar family, develops their land into a flourishing tea plantation. The elder son of the landowner Kariamallar, Krishnan, adopts modern practices, acquires education, assimilates the British-brought benefits to India, and hopes that his society will benefit from these advancements.

Rangan, Jogi's cousin and an epitome of Western influence, has the slightest regard for the land and is resentful of his people. Lingayya treats both Jogi and Rangan as his sons, lavishing love and affection on them. Lingayya gives Rangan the responsibility of tending to the sacred fire in Hethappa's temple—an honor and a privilege—rather than transferring it to his own son, Jogi. However, Rangan is not interested in what he inherits. In order to avoid serving the deity, Rangan surreptitiously flees his house and travels to the city of Othai. Fascinated by the luxury of Othai, with the British tea plantations and local government, he tries to make a living by becoming a coolie in the bazaar. Rangan serves as a personification of the flaws in the materialistic mindset that colonial capitalism mostly introduced. After one *kurinji* span (twelve years), alterations would take place not only in Rangan but also in the city of Othai, and Rangan became part and parcel of the city.

The British rule in India is a tremorous event that has left its firm imprint on the history of the forests of the Nilgiris, among other things. The indirect influence of the colonial administration over the characters, beliefs, customs, conventions, taboos, cultivation, and livelihood options of the Badaga tribes is scattered over the pages of the fiction. Though the history of the Badagas is different from that of the other tribal groups in the Nilgiri Hills, the acquisition of the region by the East India Company under the Madras Presidency had a significant impact on their lives. John Sullivan, the "founder," of Ootacamund embarked on a vision to transform the hill station into an Indian Utopia with an English landscape, between 1815 and 1830 for a seasonal shift of the capital of the Madras Presidency (Kennedy, 1996). When the architectural historian Philip Davies visited the municipality of Ootacamund, he remarked about the landscape as a "curiously distorted vision of England, an anachronistic reflection in an Oriental mirror" (1985, p. 128). With sparse Indian settlements, the hill station was viewed as a canvas on which Anglo-Indians could create a "comforting little piece of England" (Panter Downes, 1967, p. 8, 105). An excerpt from the fiction attests to this fact: "Its roads were teeming with activity. Hand carts, horses and horse-drawn carriages bearing Englishmen and their wives had been replaced by swift horseless carriages. The road was lined with cloth shops owned by people from the North and other stores that sold a variety of wonderful things. Exclusive clubs for princes and Englishmen sprung up, as did cafes, lodges, and streetlights. Double-storied buildings, schools, churches, and assembly rooms" (Krishnan, 2002, Location No. 1066).

Smith et al. (2007) chart the changes in the ecological, agricultural, and livelihood patterns of Ootacamund, with its establishment as a hill station followed by the denudation of vast swaths of forest land. European vegetables, including potatoes, carrots, and beans, were introduced in the 1820s and quickly adopted, especially by the Badaga people. The establishment of commercial tea and coffee plantations in 1838 and 1885, respectively, has dominated Nilgiri agriculture and been the primary force behind numerous socioeconomic changes. “In earlier times, when Jogi was a child, a whole hill had been set aside for grazing cattle. Now, except for one slope, coffee and tea bushes covered the entire slope” (Krishnan, 2002, Location No. 2377). Although the switch to cash-crop cultivation benefited a few Badagas and enticed them with prospects of better living standards, the promise it held didn’t last long. Moreover, the policies of the British Raj were exploitative, as the region was ruled with considerable power by relatively small numbers of British (Misra 1999).

Reports mention that the Madras Presidency initially expressed its disapproval over the abolition of customary rights enjoyed by the tribal communities through the enactment of conservation acts (Guha, 1990). The Presidency was admonished by the financial department for obstructing the rapid revenue generation, and thereafter, the British government implemented the Madras Forest Act in 1882. With its enactment, the conservation of forests gained importance in the Madras Presidency. The driving impetus behind this initiative was commercial motives masked under the garb of environmental preservation rather than conservation (Saravanan, 2008). Following this, the living conditions of the tribals in the Nilgiris declined drastically due to the curtailment of their rights over forest resources. In contrast, exploitation of the forest’s wealth continued unchecked, leading to the denudation of the forest. The imposition of Western scientific knowledge came as a pervasive justification for “scientific forestry”, involving the destruction of natural forests and their replacement by monocultures (Shiva, 1993c). Such treacherous commercial exploitation of natural resources has been described by Nixon (2011, p. 2) as an instance of “slow violence or environmentalism of the poor”. The repressive grip of the British over the tribals and the land as a whole is evident in the outburst of a character, Madhan: “He took over our country and is ruling us. He makes money by cultivating our lands” (Krishnan, 2002, Location No. 1213).

Paru, another central character in the novel and a cousin of Jogi, exemplifies the passionate bond between women and land, ‘nothing in life gave her as much joy as the land’ (Krishnan, 2002, Location No. 2078). This is instantiated when Nanjan’s headmaster asks Paru to donate her land for school renovation. Her response is one that perfectly captures the agony and desolation of parting with the soil on which she toils: “Can you equate money to my land?” (Krishnan, 2002, Location No. 2819). With the appropriation of their land for the expansion of the school, Jogi and Paru are reduced to the status of agricultural labor, subject to the whims of Jogi’s uncle, the landowner at a place called Mookumalai. Cernea (2011) emphasizes the environmental and human impacts of development-induced displacement. According to Demaria et al., colonial relations are sustained under the pretext of growth, creating an illusion of overall betterment while availing human labor and procuring cheap raw materials, securing unequal relations.

The advent of the European market economy, colonial policies, and the imperatives of development and capitalistic growth appropriated the ownership of the tribal lands and took them over for “development projects”, devaluing the rich cultural heritage of the indigenous people (Shiva, 1993a). As Shiva points out (1993b, p. 98), the twin phenomena

of globalization and development have thus heightened the detrimental situation of the tribes and left them homeless. The indigenous cultures, with their communal land-owning patterns, close connection to nature, and non-consumerist lifestyles, are often seen as barriers to modernization policies as envisioned by national governments. Jogi sputters in anger when he hears that the government is about to acquire land for the Kumari dam project: “Like a predatory snake they are coming here to snatch the food from our mouths. How can we tolerate it? Who wants the dam and the electric lights? They are snatching away our food and giving it to strangers. These Governors and Collectors!” (Krishnan, 2002, Location No. 3809). The disastrous effects on the local tribespeople of the Pykara hydroelectric dam project initiated in 1929 on the Cauvery river can be paralleled to the portrayal of the Kumari dam construction in the later part of the narrative. The younger generation of Badagas accepts change and moves with the times, in contrast to the resistance to growth echoed in the voices of the older generation opposing externally conceived growth-driven projects, agitating against public entities, corporations, and megaprojects. After much adversity, Jogi’s son Nanjan succeeds in becoming an engineer. Nanjan is appointed as one of the experts for the upcoming massive dam project in his home hills. When he argues for the need to construct the dam, Jogi supports the cause of nature. He fumes at him, “Traitor to the soil, you have lost your heart to money! You speak totally without feeling. Do you realise that it’s this soil which has fed us for generations?” (Krishnan, 2002, Location No. 3802).

The village community, headed by Rangan, revolts against the dam project. Jogi has to lose his uncle’s land for the construction of the dam. Since he is now left with neither land nor work, he joins Rangan in the protest. Jogi in turn goads others to a strike: “I can induce all those who have lost their land to join in the agitation. ... how did we drive the white man out of our country? Satyagraha! We will do the same thing now. These hills are ours. We don’t want these lights if it is going to deprive us of our land” (Krishnan, 2002, Location No. 4013). In the ensuing strike and commotion, Rangan loses his life. Later on, after a few years, the novel presents a festive Maragathamalai, rejoicing at the sight of the gleaming electric lights that lit the whole hills: “Atop the pole of victory flew the brilliant tricolor flag. In the sacred hour, when evening was drawing to an end, The Kumari river dam was opened to the acclaim of all those present” (Krishnan, 2002, Location No. 4490). The author ends on an equivocal note, wondering whether the reinvigorated New India would be forever devoid of darkness.

When the Kurinji Blooms is an ethnographic account that expresses the sufferings of those who have been uprooted by the activities of colonial capital—the sufferings of refugees from development who are denied the advantages that result from these programs. These populations plead for an ecologically and geographically viable future for their community. Thus, the new agents like the state, settlers, and planters involved in commercialization and privatization brought about a land reform that eliminated the first inhabitants from the development framework. From this vantage point, one can reconsider and question the state’s management of natural resources, grand narratives of progress, and the resulting concerns of displacement, rehabilitation, protection, and the emancipation of the adivasis.

Conclusion

With the growing populations and their aspirations demanding more growth in economic terms in independent India, Cederlöf and Sivaramakrishnan (2006) observe that the ruling class persisted in its colonial policy of annexing tribal and community lands, invoking

national interest. As the country took an unequal growth trajectory, the statistics indicate that the tribes were mainly on the wrong side of the process. As a result of the existence of these numerous communities and their diverse agendas, conflicting ambitions and conflicting expressions of nationhood arise. With the widening gap between development projects and the interests of indigenous communities, the severity of such conflicts has intensified in the last few decades.

Commercial interests, particularly the resort, plantation, and quarry lobbyists, have dominated the landscape of the Western Ghats since the 1990s. The high ranges have witnessed a tourism boom, a rush of infrastructural development, and a mushrooming of resorts and vacation houses, particularly over the last two decades. The cluster of mining companies, politicians, and real estate developers resorts to rampant exploitation of the Ghats, causing gridlock in the degrowth policies undertaken in the region. Even the laws in place were flouted to grant permissions or to ignore activities like forest clearing, mining, and construction without required permissions. As lobbies and corrupt officials profited from development, sustainability took a back seat. The focus on development by ecologically invasive commercial activities and excessive creation of built-up spaces has continued to add to the injuries caused by colonial exploitations. When the recommendations of the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel and Working Group [11], appointed by the government to ensure the sustainability of the Western Ghats, faced flak for being anti-development; it was unexpected that the stage was being set for back-to-back deluges in 2018 and 2019 in the Western Ghats. It exemplifies the observation that the relationship between indigenous peoples and their ancestral lands is eroding as climate change and globalization affect their environments and livelihoods (Cullen-Unsworth & Maclean, 2015). The land and life claimed in a saga of century long devastation should be a clarion call for society to nurture a sustainable ecosystem or to witness an impending anthropogenic apocalypse.

Kocharethi and *When the Kurinji Blooms*, written in the context of the discourse on degrowth, point to the vulnerable communities forced to live below acceptable limits. The vulnerability of such populations as the Malayarayas or Badagas is frequently the result of the extractive economies' endless expansion, dispossessions and expulsions that go along with it. According to Ramachandra Guha and Joan Martinez Alier (1997), India's economic progress has only benefited a few at the expense of high social and environmental costs. Neither education nor postcolonial development envisions long term gains unless tribal populations are granted access to their ancestral lands and their resources, which is well articulated in both fictions as instances of revolt against state-supported forest policies and development projects. It is high time for the societies of the Global South to eliminate economic growth as a universal metric and to narrow down the widening inequality between the rich and the poor. Implementing degrowth in the forests of the Global South must strike a balance between the twin elements of sustainability and indigenous adequacy. The differential effects and crises of growth-driven development and the degrowth projects of environmental protection must be evaluated through the lens of civil and human rights.

Notes

1. The terms Global North and Global South do not refer to homogenous entities. It refers to entities with many complexities. The power-wielding, policy-making, affluent minority in the South is referred to as the "north in the south." Thus, the "north", apart from the actual northern hemisphere, would also refer to former

- colonial governments, imperial powers, and all those oppressive structures and forces controlled by the imperial powers at the local and global levels.
2. The terms Malayaraya, Malayarayar, Arayan, and Arayar refer to the same tribal community.
 3. Ravikumar, A. et al. 2023; Creutzburg, L. 2022; Ferreira, A.C. et al. 2022; Cantone, B. et al. 2021; DeVore, J. 2017; McAfee, K. 2016; Järvensivu, P. 2013 deal with the forest sector from a degrowth perspective.
 4. *Thulam* month, or *Thula Masam*, is the third month in the traditional Malayalam calendar.
 5. Poonjar is one of the royal dynasties in medieval Kerala. Puniyat Rajas became vassals of Travancore kings during the conquest of Marthanda Varma in 1749–50.
 6. Marthanda Varma ruled the southern Indian state of Travancore from 1705 to 1758.
 7. Names were randomly assigned to Arayars based on the place where they had their homes (e.g., Punnackal Kela, Kela who resides beside the *Punna* tree, commonly known as Beach Mahogany), what crops they had (e.g., Injaplackal Kunjan, Kunjan who cultivates the medicinal plant *Inja*), and also the overseer's relationship with each one of them.
 8. *Janmis*, in Malayalam, refer to the landowning nobility in Kerala during the medieval period. They held proprietary rights over the land they owned. The lands that belonged to them were known as *Jenmom* lands.
 9. Thirukochi was formed following the merger of two former kingdoms, Travancore and Cochin, in 1949. It was a short-lived state in independent India (1949–1956).
 10. Pattom A. Thanu Pillai became the fourth Chief Minister of Thirukochi on March 16, 1954, with the support of the Indian National Congress.
 11. The Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP), also known as the Gadgil Commission Madhav Gadgil, recommended 64% of the Western Ghats be declared an ecologically sensitive area.

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