

# Securing the rural citizen: The anti-Kallar movement of 1896

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*This article concerns the politics of security and caste difference in the late nineteenth century Madras Presidency. Relying on a vernacular principle of interpretation emerging from the colonial archive itself—a Sanskrit ‘Law of Coincidence’—the article makes a case for collective identity in colonial India as a conjunctural attribution. I closely examine the trajectory of a widespread peasant movement that sought in 1896 to evict a single caste from hundreds of settlements altogether. The article tracks an intimate traffic between administrative sociology and native stereotype that converged on an assessment of this caste as thieving and predatory by nature. This racialised politics of intrinsic character enabled a popular programme of violent eviction. At the same time, peasant efforts to secure property and territory from threat may be understood as an alternative project of rural government, one that marked a crucial turn in the development of a moral order in the southern Tamil countryside.*

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[T]he Power of Protection ... Constitutes  
Sovereignty, in as much as reciprocal  
Obedience of the Subject is the result.  
*George Parish, Madura District Collector, 1805*<sup>1</sup>

Protection—of property, life and welfare—was a foundational fiction of colonial rule in India. Natives were subject to European governance inasmuch as they posed a threat to themselves. At the close of the nineteenth century, caste provided

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<sup>1</sup> Parish to Committee, 10 July 1805, MCR Vol. 1148.

one of the most influential means of narrating such dangers lurking within the tissues of the Indian social body. By this time, colonial officers had spent well over 100 years singling out the Kallar and Maravar castes as the preeminent policing problems of the southern districts of the Madras Presidency. Racialised contrasts between the insolent thievery of the Kallars and the docile forbearance of the cultivating citizenry upon whom they were said to prey had long gained the status of administrative cliché. As one Madurai magistrate observed in 1896, '[t]he ryots' cowardice and the Kallars' boldness are only too proverbial'.<sup>2</sup>

Kallar depredations were particularly irksome to colonial administrators because they often transpired in the name of policing—Kallar men worked as *kavalkarars*, or watchmen, in hundreds of villages throughout the erstwhile Madura District, and it was alleged repeatedly that they blackmailed cultivators into paying for the return of stolen cattle. Such 'terrorism' proved ineradicable.<sup>3</sup> In late 1895, the Board of Land Revenue raised the possibility of declaring as 'criminal tribes' the entire body of 'martial' castes in the southern districts of the Presidency—Kallar, Maravar and Agambadiyar, numbering upwards of a million individuals.<sup>4</sup> But at the very moment that this proposal was circulating among district collectors, magistrates and police officers, a widespread popular movement suddenly broke out against the Piramalai Kallars of rural Madurai.<sup>5</sup>

The movement reportedly began as a reaction to a Kallar man who had enticed away a shepherd woman and her daughter. This personal vendetta against a deceitful watchman mushroomed into mass assemblies of hundreds and thousands of ryots organised with the aim of driving Piramalai Kallars out of Dindigul, Palni and Periyakulam Taluks altogether, back to their 'native' tracts in the 'Kallar country' of southern Madurai. In village after village, cultivators swore by their ploughs to suspend Kallar watchmen and appoint men from other cultivating castes in their stead. The assemblies met weekly, organising common funds to compensate livestock owners in the case of cattle theft. All transactions with Kallars were halted. Kallars were prevented from drawing water from common wells. Village artisans, barbers and washermen were prohibited from serving Kallar households. Merchants were forbidden from selling them 'the necessities of life',

<sup>2</sup> Rajagopal to Batten, 23 May 1896, R. Dis. No. 90/Mgl, 24 Nov. 1899, Madura Collectorate Records (hereafter R. Dis. 90), MDA.

<sup>3</sup> Cardew to Price, 3 Dec. 1895, G.O. No. 473 Judicial, 31 Mar. 1897 (hereafter GO 473), TNSA.

<sup>4</sup> G.O. No. 33, Board's Proceedings (Misc.), 6 Jan. 1896, TNSA.

<sup>5</sup> The Kallars are a numerous caste dispersed throughout southern Tamil Nadu. The Piramalai Kallar are one of its most important endogamous subcastes. Although the 'Kallar country' west of Madurai has often been elaborated as their native region, T. Turnbull described the Piramalai Kallars as early as 1817 as a 'dispersed and expatriated tribe' who had established themselves as cultivators in 'the very extremities' of the Cumbum Valley. While the Kallars of Pudukottai, Tanjore and Melur were understood to have 'settled' by and large to cultivation over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Piramalai Kallar retained a popular and administrative reputation for lawless and predatory conduct. They were classified as a 'criminal tribe' between 1918 and 1947. See Turnbull, 'Account of the Various Tribes of Cullaries'.

and discourse or 'friendship' of any kind with Kallars was banned altogether.<sup>6</sup> Massive regional meetings spread the movement to hundreds of villages, and countless Kallar households fled the region in fear of arson and robbery.<sup>7</sup>

Official observers credited this 'private police innovation' with having put a complete halt to crime in the district for a span of six months.<sup>8</sup> But the state ultimately intervened against assembly leaders for overstepping the bounds of law, and Kallar *kaval* resurfaced in the Madurai countryside by 1897. In an epitaph to the abortive effort, the *Madura District Gazetteer* recorded the movement as an 'almost unique instance of the ryots combining to help themselves, [one that] deserved a less melancholy ending'.<sup>9</sup>

The anti-Kallar movement would have appeared doubly unique to European observers at the close of the nineteenth century. These peasant assemblies mobilised themselves against the grain of both institutions commonly imagined as the cause of India's implacably 'arrested development': the isolated village community and the divisive structure of caste.<sup>10</sup> The assemblies coalesced at a crucial temporal juncture in the social history of the Madras Presidency, between the emergence of new caste-based claims to superior social and political recognition on the one hand, and the rise of a more widely unifying Dravidian politics on the other.<sup>11</sup> In the following pages, I aim to capture some of the 'originality' of this brief and puzzling event in the communal politics of the Presidency.<sup>12</sup>

Imperial liberalism was a project of infinite and indefinite deferral, Uday Mehta has argued, slowly equipping putatively underdeveloped subjects with the capacity to govern themselves.<sup>13</sup> Against this temporal horizon, the anti-Kallar movement appears as a moment of impatience, when certain native subjects seized the very instruments of their gradual improvement. The movement turned the 'rule of colonial difference' into an internal principle of racial differentiation, taking the wholesale displacement of a community as the exclusion constitutive of rural society.<sup>14</sup> Kallar threats to the material property of others were construed in naturalising

<sup>6</sup> Madura Taluk Inspector's Diary, 25 July 1896, R. Dis. 90, MDA.

<sup>7</sup> In the Madura District Taluks of Dindigul, Palni and Periyakulam, responsibility for rural protection was assumed by Kallar, Valayar and Koravar watchmen. Valayar and Koravar watchmen were also targeted by some assemblies, albeit to a much lesser extent. For ease of explication, I follow the convention established by official correspondence concerning the movement and describe it as 'anti-Kallar'.

<sup>8</sup> Baudry to Inspector-General of Police, 13 Apr. 1896, G.O. 473, TNSA.

<sup>9</sup> Francis, *Madura District Gazetteer*, p. 92.

<sup>10</sup> The phrase is that of Bouglé, *Essays on the Caste System*, p. 176.

<sup>11</sup> Another obvious point of comparison would be the riots in Tinnevely District against the Nadar community in 1895 and 1899. The broad alignment of castes led by Maravars against the Nadars was more obviously a consequence of the economic dominance and social pretense of the latter. See Hardgrave, *The Nadars of Tamilnad*, and Good, 'The Car and the Palanquin'.

<sup>12</sup> On the 'originality' of subaltern pasts in India see Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, p. 39.

<sup>13</sup> Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire*.

<sup>14</sup> Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, p. 16.

terms as a consequence of the innate and essential properties of character.<sup>15</sup> The assemblies were a precocious venture in self-government, organised under the sign of the cultivating citizenry rather than the sign of the nation.<sup>16</sup> The protagonists of this movement are best understood, I will argue, as subjects of security, engaged by a policing project that both echoed and exceeded the strategies of the state.<sup>17</sup> The ambivalence of official response to their tactics underscores the ineluctable plurality of colonial power relations.

I open this article by examining the figure of the rural watchman—the sign of a deepening rift between Kallar and cultivator in the nineteenth century. I turn then to the movement itself, beginning with a problem of interpretation concerning its emergence, posed from within the archive of official correspondence.<sup>18</sup> Were the anti-Kallar assemblies a product of autonomous peasant sentiment or an unintentional consequence of colonial administrative policy? Reading this distinction against the grain, I call attention to a field of possible relations between the popular movement and the trajectory of colonial criminal tribes legislation in the 1890s—relations that signal the irreducible contingency of subaltern collective identity. I then delve deeper into this conjunctural milieu, tracking a crisscrossing traffic between colonial racial sociology and native stereotype that converged on an assessment of Kallars as thieving and predatory by nature. It is this racialised politics of intrinsic character, I argue, that enabled a popular programme of Kallar evictions. The final section focuses more closely on the tactics of security deployed by the anti-Kallar assemblies. Their efforts to secure property and territory from threat stitched modern signs and traditional practices alike into an alternative project of rural government, one that marked a crucial turn in the development of a moral order in the southern Tamil countryside.

### Farmers, Warriors, Watchmen, Thieves

The Kallars were ‘in their origin soldiers out of work’, noted the Madras Board of Land Revenue in 1896.<sup>19</sup> Studied in retrospect, such verities demand at least a measure of critical scrutiny. It does appear, however, that in the centuries preceding British rule, numerous Kallar men—like those of several other communities in the dry upland margins of southern India—pursued a livelihood as warriors as well

<sup>15</sup> See Williams, ‘Ideas of Nature’. Dirks writes that ‘the culture and nature of the colonized were one and the same’ in his introduction to *Colonialism and Culture*, p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> The movement operated in a grey zone between colonial subjecthood and the promise of citizenship, a space of possibility opened up by the liberal strategies of rule discussed by Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire*.

<sup>17</sup> Security lay at the heart of the colonial ‘biopower’ discussed by Foucault, *Society Must be Defended*, pp. 238–63.

<sup>18</sup> The most important source of evidence for this article is a voluminous and invaluable dossier of correspondence between district revenue and police officers reporting on the events of the movement as they unfolded: R. Dis. 90. My sincere thanks to former Madurai District Collector V. Thangavelu for locating this missing file for me in April 2001.

<sup>19</sup> Board’s Proceedings (Miscellaneous), No. 33, 6 Jan. 1896, TNSA.

Madura District, Madras Presidency, 1896



as peasants.<sup>20</sup> Many served as armed retainers to local kings and chieftains throughout the southern Tamil country.<sup>21</sup> Independent Kallar polities—Lilliputian in size yet organised by lineage and affiliation into regional assemblies of *nadus*—controlled the arid tracts to the immediate west and northeast of Madurai.<sup>22</sup> Efforts by the Madurai Nayak kings to subdue these assemblies in the seventeenth century—investing them with royal titles and the rights to protection fees in certain villages of the kingdom—met with no more than limited success. One popular Tamil folk ballad depicts a Nayak king harried by Kallar contumacy—fields remained fallow and remittances went uncollected in the Melur country northeast of Madurai, while the commercial thoroughfares of the capital city itself were raided by parties of Kallar thieves. *Than arasu nadu thanikkattu kallarkal* were held responsible for

<sup>20</sup> On the Shanars and Maravars of Tirunelveli, for example, see Ludden, *Peasant History in South India*.

<sup>21</sup> On Kallar political servants and sovereigns in the princely state of Pudukottai to the north of Madurai, see Dirks, *The Hollow Crown*.

<sup>22</sup> See Dumont, *A South Indian Subcaste*, for an extended discussion of the *nadu* system.

these disturbances—Kallars, that is, ‘of sovereign country and independent tract’.<sup>23</sup> Antagonism between the Kallars and the rulers of Madurai persisted throughout the turbulent eighteenth century, especially in the wake of the Nayakkar downfall. Yusuf Khan, first as a commandant for the Nawab of the Carnatic and then as the rebellious holder of Madurai in his own right, failed to canvass any revenue from Kallar strongholds around the capital.<sup>24</sup> Beginning in 1755, British army battalions engaged in at least five brutal campaigns against the Melur Kallars, massacring several thousand men, women and children in a violent effort to force their submission. Decades later, however, parties of men from the Kallar tracts continued to revolt and plunder neighbouring villages, due in no small measure to the outrageous revenue demands made by the appointed renters of these tracts. One British official despaired of ever containing the ‘marauding, restless habits’ of the Kallars, short of stationing troops permanently in their midst.<sup>25</sup> Numerous Kallar leaders and warriors allied themselves with the southern Tamil and Telugu chieftains, spearheading a widespread revolt against East India Company rule in 1801. The defeat of this rebellion and the mandatory disarmament of the populace that followed marked a watershed in Company control over the southern Madras Presidency. Even so, Kallars and other putatively martial castefolk continued to threaten British authority throughout the nineteenth century in the name of another more localised, yet all the more intractable, sovereignty: that of the *kavalkarar*, or village watchman.

‘It is the indispensable Duty of the Cawelgar [kavalkarar] according to the ancient Custom to watch the Produce of the Soil, and to be accountable for all losses sustained,’ reported Madura Collector George Parish in 1805.<sup>26</sup> Imagined as both the linchpin of native policing and a key support for the depredations of Kallars and local chieftains, the institution of kaval attracted a great deal of administrative attention when the Company assumed control over the southern districts of the Presidency. The *kavalkarar* was responsible for protecting the countryside and its inhabitants from thieves and petty plunderers.<sup>27</sup> This was a hereditary village office with fixed rights and responsibilities. Collector Rous Peter offered an exhaustive description of the village watchman’s duties in 1811:

The duties of a Cawolgar have always been considered, to watch over the Crops on the Ground, to guard them when reaped, and when thrashed, the produce is measured in his presence, and delivered over to his charge entirely; after which whatever loss is sustained, he is considered the accountable person for it. To protect the Village to which he belongs, and should any of the Inhabitants be robbed, he is obliged to make good from his own Mauniam Lands, the value of

<sup>23</sup> I refer here to the Madura Veeran folk ballad, purporting to describe events during the reign of Tirumalai Nayakkar (1623–59), but probably composed at a later time. See Shulman, *The King and the Clown*, pp. 355–66, and Blackburn, ‘The Folk Hero’.

<sup>24</sup> See Blackburn, ‘The Kallars’.

<sup>25</sup> Ravenshaw to Hurdis, 11 July 1799, MCR Vol. 1176.

<sup>26</sup> Parish to Committee, 10 July 1805, MCR Vol. 1148.

<sup>27</sup> ‘Report of Mr. Hodgson on the Dindigul District’, 28 Mar. 1808, MCR Vol. 1255, p. 3.

whatever Articles may have been stolen unless he can deliver up the offenders to Justice, and in that case he is absolved from all responsibility. This method in the first instance compels him to guard the Village with the utmost caution and in the latter occasions his being alert in the apprehension of the people who had been guilty of the Theft. He is also to watch over the Circar [Government] Grain wherever it may be deposited within the range of his Cawol, to be a guide to Detachments passing through the Country if required, and to protect all Travelers as long as they continue within his Village. These are considered the principal duties of a Cawolgar, there are others of a Minor nature, which it would be useless to mention.<sup>28</sup>

As the Collector emphasised, the village *kavalkarar* held rent-free land as *maniyam*, both for his own maintenance and as a means of assuring his honesty and efficiency in preventing and detecting theft.

These village *kaval maniyams* were often held in western Madurai by the *palaiyakarar* chieftains who had claimed sovereignty over most of the countryside in the eighteenth century. These 'little kings' took shares of harvested grain as 'watching fees' in villages both within and nearby their domains. They used such levies and assignments of land to maintain bodies of armed warriors, for purposes both of 'external war' and 'internal police'. They typically assumed *kaval* duties in villages of 'the most jungly or frontier situations'.<sup>29</sup> The armed bands of the *palaiyakarars* were identified by the British as the means by which they maintained their refractory independence and subjected the cultivating classes to 'terror' and 'plunder'. The Company forcibly disbanded these corps and assumed the lands that had once been granted to the *palaiyakarars* for their policing duties. The 1803 permanent settlement of revenues for the Dindigul country abolished *kaval maniyams* in the northern and western reaches of Madurai altogether.<sup>30</sup>

At the outset of the nineteenth century, the chieftains of western Madurai often hired Kallars as armed servants and mercenaries. The *palaiyakarars* of Devadanapatti and Doddappanaickanur were accused in 1799 of rallying bands of Piramalai Kallars to raid several villages nearby for cattle, vessels and other loot, which they shared with the refractory chieftains.<sup>31</sup> It is precisely through such accounts of Kallar threats to 'the peace of the Valley' that evidence of their *kaval* rights in the region emerges from the archival records. On the night of 6 May 1799, the Kallars of Nallathevanpatti carried off 66 bullocks from the village of Vadugapatti. A few weeks later, they sent a palm-leaf missive to the Assistant Collector explaining that although they held the right to protect this village, they had not been paid their *kaval* fees for the last two years. In a second palm-leaf missive they requested the farmers to send 40 *chakrams* in cash and 20 sheep to

<sup>28</sup> Peter to Madura Zillah Magistrate, 28 Nov. 1811, MCR Vol. 1158.

<sup>29</sup> 'Report of Mr. Hodgson', p. 3 and Nelson, *The Madura Country*, p. 21.

<sup>30</sup> Parish to Committee, 10 July 1805, MCR Vol. 1148.

<sup>31</sup> Hurdis to Board of Revenue, 19 Sept. 1799, MCR Vol. 1121.

defray their expenses for an upcoming festival. Interestingly enough, this second communication signalled the affiliation of the Nallathevanpatti Kallars to two of the regional *palaiyakarars*, while at the same time affirming their own sovereignty in the area—‘we are become a proud and independent people despising and holding in contempt both the order of the Poligars and those of the Circar’.<sup>32</sup>

The uneasy intimacy of protection and predation led British observers to decry the character and conduct of the *kavalkarars*. In his report on the native police, Collector Parish described the watchmen as ‘the Only Robbers by Profession’ in the District.<sup>33</sup> Doubts were raised concerning the efficacy of the *kaval maniyams* as a guarantee against theft, as watchmen were more likely to view these lands as their own ‘Private Property’ rather than a fund by means of which losses might be defrayed.<sup>34</sup> Despite these reservations, *kaval* was not abolished altogether at the outset of Company rule. Instead, the *kavalkarars* were put under the ‘watchful Eye’ of colonial officers, a measure of subordination that Collector Parish argued would render them ‘useful Instruments in the Hands of Government’.<sup>35</sup> The judicial reforms of 1816 attempted to regularise a body of village police, sanctioning allowances in money and grain to *kavalkarars* while at the same time relieving them of any responsibility to compensate for the loss of stolen goods.<sup>36</sup> By the mid-nineteenth century, the fees demanded by watchmen freed of such restorative obligations had reached ‘fantastic heights’. Exaction of *kaval* fees ‘due by custom’ was declared illegal in 1864, albeit with little effect.<sup>37</sup> Despite the creation of a uniform constabulary for the Presidency in 1859, a vacuum in rural policing remained, which Kallar, Maravar and Koravar watchmen were able to exploit in the southern districts of the Presidency.

In the later decades of the nineteenth century Kallars migrated further north and west of Madurai into newer villages, acquiring land and taking up duties as village watchmen for other landowning castes. Leading Kallars often assumed responsibility for the property of a few villages, appointing their own relations as ‘deputies’ to protect each locality. Over time, many such men ceased to pay any ‘contribution’ to their chiefs, becoming independent *kavalkarars* and collecting fees in their own right. This right to protect was both exclusive and transferable: watchmen in one village, for example, might pass their rights over to kin in order to assume service in another village. Often at stake in these arrangements were social relationships between particular castes and lineages rather than purely contractual relationships between individual watchmen and corporate bodies of cultivators. In tracts such as the Palni and Periyakulam Taluks, Kallars established particularly close relations with the dominant cultivating caste of Gounders. District

<sup>32</sup> Ravenshaw to Hurdis, 11 July 1799, MCR Vol. 1176.

<sup>33</sup> Parish to Committee, 10 July 1805, MCR Vol. 1148.

<sup>34</sup> Munro to Revenue Board, 28 Mar. 1802, MCR Vol. 1188.

<sup>35</sup> Parish to Committee, 10 July 1805, MCR Vol. 1148.

<sup>36</sup> *History of the Madras Police*, p. 250.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 314–15.

officials reported that these leading peasants would often encourage the 'thieving classes' to commit offences against their own enemies, employing them as 'tools ... for wreaking their feelings' against each other in factional struggles. In other words, if watchmen were implicated in violence and thievery, it was a calculated social tactic as much as a spontaneous disposition. '[I]llegal gratifications' taken by watchmen for the recovery of stolen cattle were also prevalent, officials maintained.<sup>38</sup>

These rural watchmen exploited the vast gulf between village residents and the new constabulary that was in part a consequence of deliberate state policy, for native police constables were suspected of harbouring their own predatory tendencies. If salaried officers themselves took rural patrols as occasions for intimidation, harassment and extortion, little else could be expected from the 'robber police' who were supposed to watch their own villages and report on crimes to the constabulary. *Kaval* therefore continued to operate throughout the nineteenth century, David Arnold has argued, as a 'rival system of rural control' that was not easily eradicated.<sup>39</sup> *Kavalkarars* worked alongside the official bureaucracy as a shadow state apparatus, necessary for rural administration yet 'not in any way recognised by or placed under the orders of the Tahsildar or Collector'.<sup>40</sup> *Tuppu coolie* was the name given to the infamous payment made by cultivators to watchmen for the discovery of stolen cattle, as well as the commission paid by police constables to the same men for clues to recent crimes. As late as 1920, a group of Naicker cultivators described to a native magistrate their reasons for making a formal *kaval* arrangement with the leading Kallars of one village at the heart of the 'Kallar country' in the following terms—'the British Raj was unable to suppress the Kallar Raj or protect them from the Kallars [and so] they had been forced to submit to the Kallar Raj'.<sup>41</sup>

Many British administrators at the close of the nineteenth century characterised this 'Kallar Raj' as a despotism to which ryots were made to submit by the force of terror. *Kaval* was derided as no more than a ritualised form of blackmail, a protection racket forcing cultivators to pay tithes to the very thieves who would otherwise make off with their cattle and crops. However, certain other officials were forced to admit that despite their shortcomings, the watchmen did in fact afford 'a protection to the villagers which the police are unable to give'.<sup>42</sup> *Kaval* remained a form of political sovereignty, partly explaining the reluctance of many watchmen to give up their trade. A magistrate in the Cumbum Valley, for example,

<sup>38</sup> Palni Tahsildar to Madura District Collector, 27 June 1896, R. Dis. 90, MDA.

<sup>39</sup> Arnold, 'Dacoity and Rural Crime', p. 155.

<sup>40</sup> Nelson, *The Madura Country*, Vol. 5, p. 22.

<sup>41</sup> Statement by K. Srinivasachari, 7 Apr. 1920, G.O. No. 1315 Home (Judicial), 26 May 1920, TNSA. In the same month that anti-Kallar agitations first spread throughout the District, *The Hindu* on 8 May 1896 mocked 'the vaunted security of person and property' supposedly guaranteed by British Government: residents of the town of Madurai reportedly found blackmail to the Kallars of Kilagudi a safer means of securing their property than reliance on a special, 'highly paid' Police Inspector.

<sup>42</sup> O'Farrell to Price, 25 Sept. 1895, G.O. 473, TNSA.

advised the Kallars of his jurisdiction to give up their ‘thievish habits’ in 1896. But not everyone shared his viewpoint. The *kavalkarar* of Kuchanur refused to give up his line of work—‘How can I take to the plough after having done circar [government] work so long?’ This watchman, reported the magistrate, considered agriculture ‘beneath his dignity’ but *kaval* an ‘honourable’ work of governance. And he was not alone in this perspective—‘Most Kallars in these parts are under this impression’.<sup>43</sup>

Stuart Blackburn has argued that the predatory Kallar watchman of the late nineteenth century was a perverse product of colonial administrative policy—robbed of political authority, stripped of tax-free land grants, and restricted in his ability to levy sufficient funds from cultivators.<sup>44</sup> Written on behalf of a community stigmatised for decades as ‘criminal’ by nature, such exercises in historical rehabilitation are important indeed. At the same time, however, the intimacy of protective responsibilities and predatory tactics in the traditional economy of the watchman must not be forgotten. Kallar *kavalkarars* in the countryside around Madurai exercised a form of authority predicated on the threat or possibility of violence. Predation was less an ingrained habit or a vicious tendency born of hard times and more a specific means of exercising power, one bound intimately with the offer of protection.<sup>45</sup> The persistence of this form of sovereignty ultimately authorised the declaration of the Piramalai Kallars as a ‘criminal tribe’ in 1918, and the enforcement of extraordinary policing measures in villages inhabited by Kallar castefolk. Almost two decades prior to this declaration, however, the villagers of the Madurai countryside suddenly rose up against Kallar authority. I turn now to the circumstances surrounding this unprecedented event.

### The Prose of Contingency

Fate, if propitious, brings about as if in sport  
a thing that cannot be accomplished  
[otherwise].  
*Katha Sarit Sagara*<sup>46</sup>

Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued that one of the thorniest intellectual problems posed by the evidence of subaltern pasts lies in the difficulty in closing the gap between subject and object of history, between scholars engaged in the task of representation and the figures that form the substance of their analyses. It is one thing to try and conceive peasant protagonists in their own terms. It is another thing

<sup>43</sup> Aiyasawmi Sastri to Batten, 6 June 1896, R. Dis. 90, MDA.

<sup>44</sup> Blackburn, ‘The Kallars’.

<sup>45</sup> In Tamil literary traditions, David Shulman argues, the axial sovereign of the settled country and the dangerous bandit of the peripheral wilderness are often depicted as complementary figures—‘Center and remnant stand apart, opposed, yet each partakes of the other’s nature’. See Shulman, ‘On South Indian Bandits and Kings’, and Dirks, *Hollow Crown*, p. 74.

<sup>46</sup> A statement uttered by the protagonist of the tale of Harisharman, told to illustrate the principle of *kakataliya nyaya*, discussed below. See Penzer, ed., *The Ocean of Story*, p. 273.

altogether to search among the debris of their lives for 'a principle by which we also live in certain instances'. Chakrabarty frames this methodological challenge as an incisive question: 'Is that way of being a possibility for our own lives and for what we define as our present?'<sup>47</sup> It is with this challenge in mind that I turn now to the emergence of the anti-Kallar movement in the Madurai countryside in 1896. The colonial archive here yields not only a series of events to be deciphered, but also a principle for their proper interpretation. Buried within the records concerning the sudden appearance of the movement, I will suggest in the following pages, lies an insight into the historiography of contingency.

It had not rained for several months in Madura District when the anti-Kallar movement spread throughout the countryside in the spring of 1896. The absence of summer showers had raised fears of crop failure, while the first irrigation waters from the newly erected Periyar Dam had not yet been released to southeastern Madurai.<sup>48</sup> Revenue officials in the District, preoccupied at this time with the collection of taxes from cultivators for the annual revenue settlement, learned of the anti-Kallar organising only accidentally. The movement caught the state by surprise. The forces behind its origins and the extent of its spread were both lost in a haze of dissimulation, neglect and connivance. Villagers hid their decisions from the eyes of the law, holding meetings in fields and orchards far from known public spaces. Village headmen and police constables in many places conspired with anti-Kallar assemblies to conceal the persecution of Kallars, muffling their petitions and recording instances of anti-Kallar arson as merely 'accidental'.<sup>49</sup> Magistrates failed to report on the matter as ordered by their superiors. The history of the movement must be pieced together from an uneven patchwork of reportage and correspondence.

Ammayappa Kone, headman of the village of Usilampatti in the Vedasandur Division of Dindigul Taluk, was widely identified as the 'originator' of the movement.<sup>50</sup> One derisive letter to *The Hindu*, for example, criticised the persecution of Kallars throughout the district as a consequence of 'Ammayappa Konan's Fund'.<sup>51</sup> The Usilampatti headman met with leaders of other Dindigul villages to provide details regarding the workings of the scheme, and sent his kinsmen and associates as 'emissaries' to meetings organised beyond Dindigul.<sup>52</sup> What led this man to take up the cause? Ammayappa was an Idaiyan, belonging to a shepherd caste especially vulnerable to Kallar depredations. However, it was widely rumoured that the headman nursed a 'strong personal grudge' over a theft not of cattle or sheep, but of women.<sup>53</sup> A 'Kallar Lothario' was said to have stolen away first his

<sup>47</sup> Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, p. 108.

<sup>48</sup> 'Madura', *The Hindu*, 27 May 1896.

<sup>49</sup> Narasiah to Batten, 15 Aug. 1896, R. Dis. 90, MDA.

<sup>50</sup> Venkateswara Iyer to Batten, 30 May 1896, R. Dis. 90, MDA. This village is not to be confused with the town of Usilampatti, the commercial capital of the 'Kallar country' west of Madurai.

<sup>51</sup> "'Ammayappa Konan's Fund' or the Persecution of Kallars', *The Hindu*, 13 June 1896.

<sup>52</sup> Ganapathi to Batten, 31 May 1896, R. Dis. 90, MDA.

<sup>53</sup> Batten to Twigg, 25 June 1896, R. Dis. 90, MDA.

wife and then his daughter, keeping both under his 'protection'.<sup>54</sup> To this day, it is this deeply gendered narrative that dominates many popular accounts of the movement's genesis.<sup>55</sup> Interestingly enough, the headman himself denied this 'abduction theory' and any 'vindictive feeling' it may have inspired on his part.<sup>56</sup> In his own deposition to the Vedesandur Sub-magistrate, Ammayappa Kone gave a startlingly different account of the movement's origin, one that began not with a problem of illicit love, but with a question posed by an officer of the state.

This striking possibility emerges from a report sent by Vedesandur Sub-magistrate A. Rajagopal Chettiar to Madura Sub-collector J.K. Batten in May 1896. Rajagopal was entrusted with the administration of justice in 64 villages of Vedesandur Division, the epicentre of the movement. Asked to inquire into the origins and likely consequences of the agitation in his jurisdiction, the Sub-magistrate noted his own surprise at being named the author of the very matter he was investigating. Ammayappa Kone attributed the origins of the anti-Kallar movement to an administrative survey that had been circulated recently by Rajagopal himself, and more specifically to one question therein—'why [were] the Kallars ... being employed as kavalgars [watchmen] instead of the ryots themselves?'<sup>57</sup>

This survey comprised one small part of a wide-ranging administrative effort beginning in 1895 to ascertain the best means of reforming the 'criminal tribes' of the southern districts of the Madras Presidency. Just a few months prior to May 1896, Rajagopal had been ordered to collect information regarding the habitual criminality of the Kallars in his jurisdiction. Ammayappa Kone now alleged that once he had received this circular regarding the habits of the Kallar caste, he and his associates decided to dispense with the *kaval* services of the Kallars in his village altogether. The movement then 'spread naturally' to other villages. Rajagopal called attention to this allegation only to distance himself from it, professing a sincere innocence with respect to the consequences of his action—

Your honour may see from the wording of the circular that the present movement was not at all suggested and I sincerely say that when asking the information

<sup>54</sup> Francis, *Madura District Gazetteer*, p. 92. This tale, whether apocryphal or not, recalls Wendy Brown's discussion of the state as a gendered protection racket whose 'politics between men are always already the politics of exchanging, violating, protecting, and regulating women'. See *States of Injury*, p. 188.

<sup>55</sup> See, for example, Muthu Thevar, *Muventhar Kula Thevar Samuka Carittiram*, p. 295. In this celebratory history of the Thevar castes, Muthu Thevar ascribes the movement to a personal feud between the headman and a Kallar farmer and watchman named Karuppa Thevan from the adjacent hamlet of Aruppanpatti. 'Somehow, it came to pass that Ammayappa Kone could no longer stand the sight of Karuppa Thevan'. Muthu Thevar never explains how exactly the headman came to find the Kallar so objectionable, but the implication is clear enough from his elaborate description of Karuppa Thevan—'A strapping youth with an appearance anyone would find captivating: all the graces, a beautiful form, and the bodily strength to match'. The watchman, in other words, was a stealer of hearts and not a stealer of things.

<sup>56</sup> Venkateswara Iyer to Batten, 30 May 1896, R. Dis. 90, MDA.

<sup>57</sup> Rajagopal to Batten, 31 May 1896, R. Dis. 90, MDA.

why they chose Kallars in preference to ryots I never intended that the ryots should dispense with the Services of the Kallars and themselves watch over the Villages.

The Sub-magistrate insisted that he did not even suspect that his question might have had anything to do with the actual movement itself until he heard the deposition of Ammayappa Kone himself. 'I am not therefore to blame in the matter'.<sup>58</sup>

Native Sub-magistrates were structural subalterns in the colonial administrative order, upstaged not only by superior European revenue and police officers, but often even by the native head constables nominally at their disposal.<sup>59</sup> These protestations by the Vedasandur Sub-magistrate may of course be taken for nothing more than the anxieties of a petty Indian officer caught suddenly in the midst of a minor crisis in imperial rule. However, what is most interesting is the rhetorical device that Rajagopal then employs to challenge the assertion of his culpability—

This is only an illustration of what is called *Kaka Thali Nyayam* in Sanskrit (Law of Coincidence) which is that in the case where the crow sits upon a palmyra fruit which is so ripe as about to fall down and the fruit falls down, the people ascribe the falling of the fruit to the [crow].

*Kakataliya nyaya*, literally 'the law of the crow and the palmyra palm', is a common parable of pure chance in classical Sanskrit literature and philosophy. In certain textual exegeses of the principle, the fruit lands fatally on the head of the crow, while in other versions the crow becomes the lucky consumer of fallen, broken fruit. While the figure marks instances of both good fortune and bad luck, its kernel is always the purely accidental coincidence of only apparently related phenomena.<sup>60</sup>

The administrative circular and the peasant movement only appeared to be related, argued Rajagopal, like the landing of a crow and the subsequent falling of a fruit. It is unclear as to exactly how a native officer posted in the hinterlands of the Madras Presidency towards the end of the nineteenth century learned of this heuristic device—the colonial archive does not tell us, for example, whether the principle of comparison was an artifact of a classical training in Sanskrit, or an attendance of religious discourses delivered by Hindu pundits, or a personal passion for philosophical texts. In any case, through its use the English-educated Sub-magistrate doubled the body of law itself, taking recourse to Sanskrit precepts in order to defend the propriety of his conduct as a magistrate of British India. Was Rajagopal's deployment of the term itself accidental, or may we find the tracks of some other reason behind it?

*Kakataliya nyaya* is a figure for the *contingency* of circumstance faithful to the twofold etymology of the term in English: a slight touch in space at a chance

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> 'The Police and the Magistracy', *The Hindu*, 28 May 1896.

<sup>60</sup> Bloomfield, 'The Fable of the Crow and the Palm-Tree'.

moment in time.<sup>61</sup> Taken as such a figure, the parable offers a unique window into the conjunctural character of subaltern collective identification. At first glance, Rajagopal appears to be making a familiar argument. The spread of the movement was ‘spontaneous’, he claimed, a natural consequence of longstanding peasant resentment against the Kallars. Spontaneity was a stock figure in the official narration of colonial uprisings by the peasantry, characterising sudden eruptions of disorder in an otherwise smooth stream of progressive historical possibility. Nevertheless, in this instance the resort to contingency served not as a mark of an elite ‘incomprehension’ of peasant agency—in the manner that Ranajit Guha has argued so eloquently—but rather as the very cipher of the movement’s explicability.<sup>62</sup> To grasp the difference in the Sub-magistrate’s reasoning, we must further consider the resonance of the crow and the palm.

The *Yoga Vasistha* is one classical Sanskrit text that relies heavily on *kakataliya nyaya* in order to evoke the accidental nature of the phenomenal world. In the dreams and dialogues of this voluminous ninth-century poem, illusions are both made and unmade through the workings of chance. But in an elaborate exegesis, Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty has argued that the dice-throw of fate in the *Yoga Vasistha* is always skewed by the weight of inherited tendencies: ‘The palm tree of pure chance gives rise to the seed of karma and is in turn born out of that seed,’ she writes.<sup>63</sup> Here then is a distinctive mode of narrating events in time, one that shuttles between the poles of pure freedom and determination only to call the sufficiency of both explanatory alternatives into question. In the worldly play of illusion as depicted in the text, elements of pure chance and the ‘gravity of karmic tendency’ meet to make ‘certain coincidences not only possible but probable’.<sup>64</sup> The present is a time of caprice, yet the weight of history on this present bears something more than accidental force. The matter turns, to take this influence of gravity back to the statement of Sub-magistrate Rajagopal, on the ripeness of the fruit.

The fable of the crow and the palm charts the conjuncture of two temporalities: the span of a flight and the maturing of a fruit. In the invocation of this fable by the Sub-magistrate of Vedasandur, the secular time of history meets a mythical time of chance and return.<sup>65</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, that Rajagopal used the figure to anchor a doubled strategy of explanation. On the one hand, he argued that the origin of the movement in the village of Usilampatti was entirely ‘providential’.<sup>66</sup> Ammayappa Kone himself was a man of inexplicable ‘popularity’, one

<sup>61</sup> On contingency, Bhabha writes: ‘The contingent is contiguity, metonymy, the touching of spatial boundaries at a tangent, and, at the same time, the contingent is the temporality of the indeterminate and the undecidable’. See *The Location of Culture*, p. 186.

<sup>62</sup> Guha, *Elementary Aspects*, p. 222.

<sup>63</sup> Doniger O’Flaherty, *Dreams, Illusion and Other Realities*, p. 268.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 219.

<sup>65</sup> On the problem of commensurability opened up by such confrontations of disjunctive times, see Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, pp. 72–96.

<sup>66</sup> Rajagopal to Batten, 31 May 1896, R. Dis. 90, MDA.

with neither strength of mind nor a 'considerable influence over his fellow men'.<sup>67</sup> Any question of a relation between the headman's actions and the magistrate's survey was therefore accidental and inconsequential. In this sense, the cause of the movement was strictly opaque.

On the other hand, Rajagopal also contended that the spread of the movement throughout his jurisdiction was a natural and necessary consequence of the suffering endured by other villagers at the hands of the Kallars. A wish long kept hidden in their hearts had finally found its means of expression. Their unprecedented solidarity proved that the figurative palmyra fruit must have fallen solely from the weight of its own maturity—'Considering the unity among the villagers in this matter, it is not at all probable that it could have been effected by *pressure*'.<sup>68</sup> With 'pressure' Rajagopal euphemised perhaps the weight of the crow on the branch. An incidental contact with a hypothetical state project of controlling Kallar depredations could not have sent the ryots tumbling down a course of punitive excess. Any correspondence between the fantasies of the state and the desires of the peasantry was a matter of nothing more than coincidence. The latter had ripened on their own.

Rajagopal succeeded in exonerating himself. The Madura Sub-collector appended nothing but a terse acknowledgement to the Sub-magistrate's report: 'The undersigned does not attribute the movement in any way to the Sub-magistrate's circular'.<sup>69</sup> In laying this apparently minor matter to rest, however, the colonial state relieved itself of a much weightier burden—its own potential culpability for the rise and spread of the agitation. Alleviating the rationale for responsible intervention, the prose of contingency authorised a suspension of the state itself.

The district administration approached the anti-Kallar movement as a phenomenon alien to itself, one that demanded careful surveillance but only minimal management. Magistrates and police openly sympathised with aggrieved ryots, counselling them to restrain their impulses within the bounds of the law in order to ensure that the state would *not* have to intervene against them. The Madura Sub-collector issued a notice prohibiting assembly meetings in June 1896, only to back down from this ban within a few days. His subordinates were instructed to act only on the action of the assemblies, to maintain certain limits on their conduct but to remain passive otherwise—

The people are within their rights in dispensing with the Services of Kallars in the detection of crime and refraining from paying them Kaval fees. The Sub-Magistrate of course will not encourage them in doing so, he will simply remain neutral, but prevent them going further.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>67</sup> Rajagopal to Batten, 27 June 1896, R. Dis. 90, MDA.

<sup>68</sup> Rajagopal to Batten, 31 May 1896, R. Dis. 90, MDA (emphasis mine).

<sup>69</sup> Batten to Rajagopal, 4 June 1896, R. Dis. 90, MDA.

<sup>70</sup> Batten to Aiyasawmy Sastri, 2 June 1896, R. Dis. 90, MDA.

Giorgio Agamben has argued that contingency is best understood as a state of suspension: neither that which cannot be nor that which cannot not be, but rather that which *can not* be, poised in a grey zone between the being and the non-being of an event.<sup>71</sup> It is this condition that the colonial state parasitised in the face of the anti-Kallar movement. Confronted with a proliferation of anti-Kallar assemblies, the state suspended its own capacities in order to preserve the potentiality of a movement construed as independent of itself. Time and again, Kallars were recorded as leaving their villages voluntarily, ‘without any dissatisfaction whatever’.<sup>72</sup>

State officials exculpated themselves from any responsibility for the origins of the movement by positing it as a necessary consequence of longstanding peasant grievances. However, the initial vacillations of anti-Kallar organising challenge the simplicity of this characterisation. The villagers of Nagayankottai, near Usilampatti, had dispensed with the services of Kallar watchmen as early as January 1895. They had even taken two Kallars to court on charges of theft. For the duration of these trials, however, the matter of their anti-Kallar organising was kept hidden from the court. Sub-magistrate Rajagopal suspected that they were ‘doubtful whether the movement would be proper or improper in the eye of law’.<sup>73</sup> By the spring of 1896, however, it was widely believed that the state supported the movement of the ryots against the Kallars. Batten and other officials now found themselves struggling to prove that the Kallars enjoyed equal protection under colonial law. What had changed?

‘[T]he ryots extol to the skies the good omened hour which generated in their minds the idea of forming the assemblies,’<sup>74</sup> wrote the Vedasandur Sub-magistrate. Read against the grain, this subaltern invocation of a good time for mobilisation opens up the possibility that the anti-Kallar movement may indeed have been sparked by a sudden state initiative. The kernel lies in the seemingly innocuous question posed by Rajagopal in his circular regarding ‘why they chose Kallars in preference to ryots’. The survey asked ryots why they chose Kallars rather than others like themselves as guardians of their cattle, fields and property, taking for granted a binary distinction between the Kallar and the ryot. Powerful forces were at work in naturalising this opposition at the very moment that the movement began to spread through the Madurai countryside. The Sub-magistrate’s query clung to these efforts by more than a slender stem.

To deny his alleged role in the origins of the movement, the Vedasandur Sub-magistrate had to assert the underlying contingency of its peasant provenance. In what follows, I turn to the same explanatory strategy but trace it against the grain, excavating a sudden contact between state project and peasant movement at the close of the nineteenth century. In so doing, I rely on *kakataliya nyaya* as a principle of historical interpretation, one that reveals collective identity in the Madurai

<sup>71</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities*, p. 261.

<sup>72</sup> Nilakottai Sub-magistrate to Madura Joint Magistrate, R. Dis. 90, MDA.

<sup>73</sup> Rajagopal to Batten, 27 June 1896, R. Dis. 90, MDA.

<sup>74</sup> Rajagopal to Batten, 23 May 1896, R. Dis. 90, MDA.

countryside as a conjunctural attribute rather than a stable essence. Thinkers such as Hegel and Marx attributed the ‘natural vegetative existence’ and the ‘undignified, stagnatory, and vegetative life’ of India to the stultifying influence of caste.<sup>75</sup> *Kakataliya nyaya* transforms the stagnation implied by such vegetal metaphors into an irreducible contingency of identification, restoring possibility without legislating direction. ‘Flowers bloom and fruits ripen in their due time,’ wrote the poet of the *Yoga Vasistha*.<sup>76</sup> Whether this is a good or bad time depends perhaps on where one is when they fall.

### Kudigal Rally

Writing under the pseudonym ‘FACT’, an anonymous reader penned a plaintive letter to *The Hindu* on 13 June 1896 regarding the persecution of Kallars in the Madura District. The letter described a movement of ‘the ignorant and the illiterate’ that sought to drive the Kallars out of Dindigul Taluk. On the morning of the 9th in the village of Nellore, the author wrote, some Kallars had refused to leave. Throughout the night, a ‘bull-horn bugle’ was blown, and 10,000 men had assembled from the surrounding villages by daybreak—‘they say that the rub of the “Fund” is that every village to which the sound is transmitted must send at least one man for every household mustered on the spot’. The letter went on to describe the ‘heart-rending’ scene that transpired next. All the Kallar houses were set afire. Women and children fortified in the houses were said to have perished in the flames. One Kallar woman was dragged out and ‘outraged most brutally’ while another Kallar man was tortured and cast into a pile of flaming ploughs and oil sticks. Properties were looted and carried away.

The letter conceded knowledge of the event only through rumour—‘The story, if true, is most horrible’. However, it was the apparent indifference of the government to the possibility of its truth that most galled this writer: ‘Mr. Editor, what have these poor Kallars done to the Government that the Government may thus for the while withdraw their support to these poor people? What right have these ten thousand hounds to hunt after these poor people? Are we living under the British Government or not?’<sup>77</sup>

The writer to the editor of *The Hindu* made an ironic and important reversal in appealing to the government on behalf of Kallars *hunted* by 10,000 hounds—by 1896, well over a century of colonial administrative discourse had railed against the Kallars as the quintessential predators of the Madurai countryside. When the East India Company first assumed control of the Madurai and Dindigul provinces in the late eighteenth century, military detachments were repeatedly posted

<sup>75</sup> See Inden, ‘Orientalist Constructions of India’, p. 424, and Marx, ‘The British Rule in India’, p. 40.

<sup>76</sup> Venkatesananda, *The Concise Yoga Vasistha*, p. 77.

<sup>77</sup> “‘Ammayappa Konan’s Fund’”, Or the Persecution of Kallars’, *The Hindu*, 13 June 1896.

on critical roads and passes to quell 'predatory incursions' by the 'Colleries' against travellers, traders and cultivators. The subduing of the *palaiyakarar* chieftains, the formation of a village police force, and the introduction of a ryotwari revenue settlement partly transformed Kallar truculence in the nineteenth century from a political challenge to British supremacy into a more trifling problem of civil order. Nevertheless, recurrent incidents of cattle lifting and highway robbery demanded Government intervention. In 1895, one year prior to the anti-Kallar movements, the Board of Land Revenue asked district officials of the southern Madras Presidency how best to reform the 'predatory habits' of Kallars and other putatively criminal tribes.<sup>78</sup> In his reply the District and Sessions Judge of Madura treated such habits as a special property—both 'instinctual and traditional'—of the Kallars and their kindred tribesmen.<sup>79</sup> Indeed, the thick flurry of official correspondence regarding the violence against Kallars reserved the word 'depredation' solely to project the worrying possibility of a violent Kallar retaliation against the organised ryots.<sup>80</sup>

However, the anti-Kallars were indeed hunting. The claim made by the writer to *The Hindu* was more than a turn of phrase. Throughout the Taluks of Dindigul, Palni and Periyakulam, anti-Kallar assemblies seized on the hunting horn as the means of calling men together to chase after thieves. It appears that this tactic was first employed by the villagers of Kombai in 1894 as a means of tackling itinerant Kuravars. Kombai lay in the Vedesandur Division on the edge of the hills bordering Trichinopoly District. There were only two passes between the village and these hills, and it was through these passes that Kuravars from Trichy made 'inroads' into Kombai and escaped with the articles that they had stolen. It was proposed that the horn—'their favourite instrument used in calling the villagers to collect together to set out for hunting'—be used to rally people in the event of a theft, to block off the hill passes and thereby prevent the culprits from escaping.<sup>81</sup> This proved so effective that the ryots of nearby Nagayankottai adopted the same system in the next year to deter Kallars from committing thefts, and the movement was said to have spread from there. In villages with anti-Kallar assemblies, a property owner would blow the horn if a theft was discovered. Guards appointed by the assemblies, along with other villagers, were expected to rush to the spot and track any footprints that might lead towards the stolen items.<sup>82</sup> Anyone found guilty of blowing a horn as a false alarm was thrown out of the assembly.

The fatal riot in Nellore began with such a chase. Nellore was a small hamlet of Aiyampalayam near the edge of the Palni Hills, inhabited almost exclusively by Kallars. A Nellore Kallan had been caught in the act of stealing a few bullocks from the village of Periyur in the Lower Palni Hills. A large number of 'hill ryots' came

<sup>78</sup> G.O. No. 33, Board's Proceedings (Misc.), 6 Jan. 1896, TNSA.

<sup>79</sup> Dumergue to Price, 8 Oct. 1895, GO 473, TNSA.

<sup>80</sup> Palni Tahsildar to District Magistrate, 27 June 1896, R. Dis. 90, MDA.

<sup>81</sup> Rajagopal to Batten, 27 June 1896, R. Dis. 90, MDA.

<sup>82</sup> Venkateswara Iyer to Batten, 30 May 1896, R. Dis. 90, MDA.

down into the plains in pursuit, blowing *karikombu* horns as they followed him—the Nilakottai Sub-magistrate described the action as ‘a signal to invite people’.<sup>83</sup> This signal must have been understood, for villagers from Sithayankottai, Sithurevu, Aiyampalayam and other villages on the nearby plains met the Periyur ryots at Nellore by sundown on the 8th.

By the morning of the 9th a crowd of several thousand people was massed around Nellore. The Station House Officer and two constables were also present, but were allegedly ‘utterly powerless to prevent what happened’. The crowd surrounded the village and demanded the surrender of the alleged stolen bullocks. Some Kallars tried to frighten the assailants off with sickles, and somehow a fight erupted. Notified by telegram, the Joint Magistrate arrived two days later to find four men dead and several Kallar women with ‘marks of injury’. The party from Periyur had disappeared. ‘Everything was quiet’, but all 79 of the Kallar houses had been burnt to the ground.<sup>84</sup>

The Kallars told the Joint Magistrate that an announcement had recently been broadcast in Aiyampalayam calling for their eviction and boycott. Although they were vague regarding the identity of those who attacked Nellore, the aftermath of the riot proved that the crowd was quite mixed in its composition. Among the dead were a Naicker from Sithurevu, and an Aiyampalayam Pallar who was almost decapitated while trying to steal some grain. The Rowthers (Muslims) of Sithayankottai had reportedly been threatened with retaliatory arson. All these various plains people had heeded the call of the hill villagers’ *karikombu*. ‘The others hearing horns blown joined and being inclined to Sympathise with the Periyur men against Kallars backed them up.’<sup>85</sup>

However, it appeared that some village officers were just as sympathetic. The Aiyampalayam Station Head Officer and Village Munsiff alleged to the Sub-magistrate that the crowd had ‘collected all on a sudden’ at Nellore on the morning of the 9th rather than the evening of the 8th.<sup>86</sup> The SHO sent word of this massing of people that morning through an old messenger rather than through a special constable, preventing the Sub-magistrate from arriving in time to avert the riot. Reporting to his superior Police Inspector regarding the affair, the Station Head Officer claimed that ‘the Kullens of the village set fire to their houses themselves and deserted the village’.<sup>87</sup>

How are we to interpret this powerful and widespread sympathetic inclination that drew together people of different castes and distant villages for a common but violent cause? In his classic account of peasant insurgency, Ranajit Guha noted the reliance of the Santal *hool* on the hunting horn, taken up as an established means of mobilising one distinct community.<sup>88</sup> However, what is striking about

<sup>83</sup> Narasiah to Batten, 9 June 1896, R. Dis. 90, MDA.

<sup>84</sup> Batten to Twigg, 13 June 1896, R. Dis. 90, MDA.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> Narasiah to Batten, 9 June 1896, R. Dis. 90, MDA.

<sup>87</sup> Subba Naidoo to Baudry, 9 June 1896, R. Dis. 90, MDA.

<sup>88</sup> Guha, *Elementary Aspects*, p. 129.

the anti-Kallar horn is the novelty of the collective that it hailed. These assemblies were rallied around a new identity constituted through a hitherto unknown negation. The Joint Magistrate described the ‘original aggressors’ in Nellore as ‘Anti Kallars’.<sup>89</sup> A marginal comment here noted that this term—Anti Kallars—was widely used to denote the ‘opposite party’ in the chain of agitation. While administrative discourse routinely described this party as a collectivity of ‘ryots’, it is evident that shepherds, merchants, artisans, barbers and untouchables were also enlisted in the assemblies, along with cultivators paying revenue to the state.

The anti-Kallar movement was neither a confrontation between Left and Right Hand castes, nor an agrarian mobilisation by class. The institutional fabric of its solidarity was thin at best. As late as 3 June, the Nilakottai Sub-magistrate reported that anti-Kallar organisations had not yet been formed in a single village in his jurisdiction, although meetings had been held here and there.<sup>90</sup> The Nellore riot erupted in his jurisdiction only six days later. What were the grounds for antagonism between Kallar and anti-Kallar? Why is it that ‘[t]he villagers embraced [the movement] with open arms’?<sup>91</sup>

An attempt to answer these questions must begin with the several petitions sent by desperate Kallars to the district administration, all of which named their antagonists in the plural as either *kudigal* or *kudiyavargal*. The root *kudi* bears a broad semantic load in Tamil—citizen, subject, family, house, household, inhabitant and peasant are only some of its many senses.<sup>92</sup> Classical Tamil literary texts used the term broadly to distinguish various social classes and kinds. The epic poem *Cilappatikaaram*, for example, distinguished between *arakkudi* and *marakkudi*—between the virtuous and settled inhabitants of the plains and the marauding bands of hunters and warriors who held in their bows no more than figurative ploughs.<sup>93</sup> *Kudi* was also used to distinguish a body of dependent subjects from the ruler responsible for their well being. ‘[As] the whole world lives looking to the sky, the *kudi* live looking to the scepter of the king,’ claimed the ethical treatise *Tirukkural* in the fifth century.<sup>94</sup> Texts such as these imply that distinctions of social quality and the difference of political sovereignty have long inflected the ascription of the status *kudi* to particular groups in the Tamil country: *kudigal* could thus be construed as subjects of an exemplary character.

The body of rural citizens mobilised against the Kallars was a collective assembled through the social networks of the dominant peasantry. It is clear that landed elites led the assemblies and relied on existing channels of village authority to enforce solidarity. In many localities, meetings were announced but then subsequently

<sup>89</sup> Batten to Twigg, 13 June 1896, R. Dis. 90, MDA.

<sup>90</sup> Narasiah to Batten, 3 June 1896, R. Dis. 90, MDA.

<sup>91</sup> Rajagopal to Batten, 31 May 1896, R. Dis. 90, MDA.

<sup>92</sup> *Tamil Lexicon*, p. 968. *Kudi* might approximate the Anglo-Indian ‘ryot’ in its wider, popular sense. See Yule and Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson*, p. 588.

<sup>93</sup> Shulman, *The King and the Clown*, p. 350.

<sup>94</sup> Varadarajan, ed., *Tirukkural*, no. 542, my translation.

cancelled due to the failure of certain 'leading ryots' to arrive on the spot. Assemblies employed the service castes in a subordinate role: the latter were appointed to collect subscriptions from individual houses, for example, and to inform Kallar households that they were expected to leave within a matter of days. Those who failed to attend meetings and swear their oaths were liable to severe fines and boycott by village servants. As I noted earlier, Gounders and other cultivators had in the past employed Kallars as henchmen in factional struggles against each other. However, the alliances forged by the movement cut effectively across these vertical blocs. The success of leading cultivators in forging a 'union among all classes of people' was indexed by the repeated failure on the part of the Kallars to garner any witnesses willing to testify to their claims of persecution.<sup>95</sup>

However, the identification of the *kudigal* as the antagonists of the Kallars opens up a significant paradox: prosperous Kallar cultivators were just as likely to be evicted by the movement as landless watchmen or coolies. Consider the evidence provided in a meticulous chart prepared by the Tahsildar of Palni. The table identified 141 Kallar men as inhabitants of 47 villages of the Taluk. Fifty of these men were identified as registered landowners paying an annual revenue of anywhere between Rs 2 and Rs 42 to the state, a figure that naturally excluded an unknown number of tenants and undocumented cultivators. Most of these cultivators also worked as watchmen—indeed, at least half the watchmen in these villages were recorded as revenue-paying landowners. Though the movement had just begun in the Taluk when the table was composed, 29 Kallars had already begun to leave their villages—16 of them had either sold their lands or were preparing sale deeds.<sup>96</sup> A petition from one Kallar farmer in the Taluk described the compulsions that forced such sales—if the *kudigal* blew the horn, a mob would descend on his orchard to pillage the crops. He and his relations had been forbidden from taking up fallow government lands for cultivation, and they were no longer allowed to impound cattle that they caught grazing surreptitiously on their own lands.<sup>97</sup>

By the late nineteenth century, the landed cultivating classes of the Madras Presidency had been firmly established both by revenue policy and by administrative sociology as the bedrock of the rural social and economic order. Private property in land was identified as one of the surest means of securing the lawful obedience of putatively 'martial' castes such as the Kallars throughout the Presidency. How, then, might we account for the tenacity of a radical divide between the Kallars and the *kudigal* of Madura District, one that worked to such violent effect in the months of 1896? The depth of this hostility was a great puzzle to the administrators of the district. 'Why do they want to drive out the Kallars, and especially Substantial ryot Kallars,' asked Madura Collector Twigg.<sup>98</sup>

<sup>95</sup> Palni Tahsildar to Madura Sub-collector, 27 June 1896, R. Dis. 90, MDA.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> Nallaveera Thevar to Madura Collector, 2 June 1896, R. Dis. 90, MDA.

<sup>98</sup> Undated questionnaire from Madura District Collector, R. Dis. 90, MDA.

In the following pages, I will argue that the Kallars of these Taluks, however settled with respect to property, were nonetheless viewed by rural inhabitants as *unsettling* with respect to their conduct. Kallars were imagined as a people predatory by nature, posing a natural threat to the property and person of others. The movement seized on this imagination—born *kakataliya* of both colonial sociology and native stereotype—to rally the entire anti-Kallar social body against the entire body of Kallars. This was undoubtedly a contingent ‘articulation’ of racial sentiment—time and again, the anti-Kallars made it clear that they acted under the impression that the state supported them.<sup>99</sup> Their agency was bound up closely with colonial constructions of social difference.

### A Terror of Race

As well expect the gypsies of Bohemia or Spain to fall in at once with the frock-coat and silk-hat life of the haberdasher’s assistant in London as expect to at once change Kullens and Maravers into ordinary villagers of the plains of Southern India.

*Malabar Superintendent of Police, 1895*<sup>100</sup>

For colonial administrators, fear was the force that wedged a divide between the Kallars and the rest of the native population. British recourse to ‘terror’ to explain the effect that Kallars had on all others who lived alongside them was remarkable for its sheer redundancy. Reflecting on his past experiences in Madurai, for example, Malabar Superintendent of Police F. Fawcett described the ‘abject dread’ in which even a couple of Kallars were held by other natives—this great fear was a ‘terrible power’ that they wielded in order to maintain a ‘distinctly parasitic’ existence.<sup>101</sup> The Kallars and Maravars were the ‘reverse of timid’, with very little of the ‘gentle Brahmin’ or the ‘mild Hindu’ in them. This was only to be expected, according to Fawcett, for their difference in character was caused by a difference of blood.

Although the science of racial classification in southern India was still in its ‘foetal stage’, Fawcett conceded, there was enough evidence to surmise that the Kallars and Maravars were remnants of the earliest inhabitants of the country, those who were there before the Naidus and Naickers, the Mudaliars and Vellalas. Fawcett’s invocation of Kallar aboriginal status enabled him to make a rather ingenious argument concerning the terror they evoked. Their parasitic conduct was nothing more than the vindictive expression of a ‘racial antipathy, spoiling those who overran them long long ago’. Writing in November 1895, Fawcett compared the

<sup>99</sup> On the concept of ‘articulation’ as a joining in enunciation, see Hall, ‘Race, Articulation’.

<sup>100</sup> Fawcett to IGP, 20 Nov. 1895, GO 473, TNSA.

<sup>101</sup> Fawcett to IGP, 20 Nov. 1895, GO 473, TNSA.

Kallars to the Biblical Ishmael in a startling premonition of the exiles to come in the following spring.<sup>102</sup>

A racial grammar of difference underwrote colonial sociologies of caste in the late nineteenth century, one that relied in the Madras Presidency primarily on a naturalised distinction between the Aryan and the Dravidian.<sup>103</sup> In this classification of races, Kallars were assigned a murky place on the margins of the latter category, surely 'aboriginal'<sup>104</sup> but only tenuously Dravidian in their distinctive physiognomy and traditions. V. Kananakasabhai Pillai, for example, described the Kallars as descendents of the Eyinar or Vedar, the 'most lawless' of the Naga tribes said to have occupied the country before the invasion of the Tamils from the northeast. His account of the Eyinar, who had also busied themselves with 'cattle lifting and pillage and murder', appeared in an instalment of *The Tamils 1800 Years Ago* published in the *Madras Review* in 1896.<sup>105</sup>

Such imaginations of caste as race, however, bore the imprint of a characteristic tension between racial identity as an index of inherited essence and racial difference as an object of evolutionary improvement.<sup>106</sup> On the one hand, Kallar thievery was imagined as being 'in the blood',<sup>107</sup> a stubborn and ineradicable tendency towards violence and depredation that demanded extraordinary repression and surveillance on the part of the state. On the other hand, however, administrative discourse at the close of the nineteenth century also betrayed a faith in the possibility of redeeming the degenerate Kallar character. The report on the 1871 Census of the Madras Presidency, for example, noted the 'great change' that had come over the Kallars and Maravars thanks to the Pax Britannica—'they have now settled down in peaceable occupations'.<sup>108</sup> The question, in a sense, was whether or not the Kallars could be absorbed indistinguishably into the great body of common plainsfolk.

These contradictory possibilities were articulated by a series of administrative measures undertaken in the latter half of the nineteenth century to police the conduct of so-called criminal tribes and classes in British India. The Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 singled out a number of communities of itinerant traders, forest dwellers and putatively professional thieves in north India for special surveillance, spatial constraint and rigid controls. The Act drew in part on contemporary anxieties in England concerning the threat posed by gangs of habitual offenders to the urban bourgeoisie and the honest working poor. While this domestic threat was interpreted as modern pathology, habitual crime in India was taken as the

<sup>102</sup> On nineteenth-century discourses of aboriginality in India, see Guha, 'Lower Strata, Older Races'.

<sup>103</sup> Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics*, and Dirks, *Castes of Mind*.

<sup>104</sup> Mullaly, *Notes on Criminal Classes*, p. 82.

<sup>105</sup> V. Kananakasabhai, *The Tamils Eighteen Hundred Years Ago*, reviewed in *The Hindu*, 29 May 1896.

<sup>106</sup> See Moore, et al., 'The Cultural Politics of Race and Nature'.

<sup>107</sup> Twigg to Price, 10 Apr. 1896, GO 473, TNSA.

<sup>108</sup> Cornish, *Report on the Census*.

immemorial tradition of certain independent and unified groups, living and preying almost imperceptibly from the margins and from within the fabric of rural society.<sup>109</sup>

This legacy of confrontation between settled cultivators and itinerant communities of thieves was readily perceived as a ‘war of races’, to borrow a phrase from Michel Foucault. Like the biopolitics of blood animating nineteenth-century discourses of class and biological evolution in Europe, criminal tribes discourse in India called into being a practice of ‘permanent purification’.<sup>110</sup> The discourse projected a rural social body needing defense from the enemies lurking within its own tissues. Colonial law sought to protect Indian society from its habitual criminals by either closely watching and repressing the latter, or by segregating and transforming them into ‘moral subjects of the Raj’.<sup>111</sup> Either way, this politics of security was underwritten by an ideology of race.

The Criminal Tribes Act was extended to the Madras Presidency only in 1911 and applied to the Piramalai Kallars in 1918.<sup>112</sup> However, in 1895 the Government of the Presidency disseminated an audacious circular regarding the ‘best means of weaning the criminal tribes in the Southern districts from their predatory habits’. The ‘tribes’ in question at this moment were identified as three castes amounting to an astonishing 18 per cent of the population of the southern districts of the Presidency—409,811 Kallars, 308,175 Maravars and 296,849 Agambadiars.<sup>113</sup> The Board of Land Revenue described these castes as former soldiers ‘more or less loosely and inadequately settled on the soil’, liable by instinct, tradition and pleasure to prey on the remaining people of the region.<sup>114</sup>

The Board solicited the opinion of a number of judges, police officers and revenue officials regarding the advisability of administering these castes as criminal tribes. Certain administrators affirmed that the matter required urgent and repressive means. The Madura Superintendent of Police, for example, recommended public floggings, garroting, and intense spells of solitary confinement as remedies for habitual offences.<sup>115</sup> Most respondents, however, counselled caution. Weaning from crime was a slow and deliberate process that was underway ‘automatically’: one had to trust in the ‘humanising influences of time and civilization’.<sup>116</sup> The Tanjore District and Sessions Judge—writing from a district where Kallars had by and large turned to lawful occupations—argued that the proposed notification would only ‘confirm [each Kallar and Maravar] in the belief that he and society

<sup>109</sup> Nigam, ‘Disciplining and Policing’; Sen, *Disciplining Punishment*; and Yang, *Crime and Criminality*.

<sup>110</sup> Foucault, *Society Must be Defended*, p. 62.

<sup>111</sup> Nigam, ‘Disciplining and Policing’, p. 161.

<sup>112</sup> Piramalai Kallars were declared a criminal tribe by G.O. No. 1331 Home (Judl.), 5 June 1918, TNSA.

<sup>113</sup> Board of Land Revenue, G.O. No. 33, Board’s Proceedings (Misc.), 6 Jan. 1896, TNSA.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>115</sup> Baudry to IGP, 13 Apr. 1896, GO 473, TNSA.

<sup>116</sup> Rawson to Price, 6 Nov. 1895, and O’Farrell to Price, 25 Sept. 1895, GO 473, TNSA.

are in a chronic state of warfare'.<sup>117</sup> Security lay only in the possibility of their reform and incorporation into the body of peaceful rural citizens.

The anti-Kallar movement flared up at the very moment that these papers were circulating between mofussil outposts and provincial headquarters. The circuit of investigation and deliberation included the survey on Kallar conduct taken by Vedasandur Sub-magistrate Rajagopal, the same innocuous query to which Ammayappa Kone had attributed his uprising. In the chain of events that propelled the movement, a *kakataliya* relation between the mechanics of state sociology and the appearance of peasant agency is unmistakable. But what bearing did colonial discourses of race and terror have on the motives and methods of rural subjects? To what extent did subaltern protagonists share the presumptions of the state officials who applauded their conduct?

It is evident that Indian elite classes generally voiced little dissent in the matter of criminal tribes legislation.<sup>118</sup> In the official correspondence concerning the anti-Kallar assemblies, native magistrates themselves described the Kallars and Koravars as 'criminal classes' or 'thieving classes'. And there were roughly contemporaneous depictions of fearsome Kallar conduct circulating in the Tamil print culture of the southern districts. Take, for example, a few verses from the *Santhana Thevan Sinthu*, a 1907 leaflet ballad concerning the exploits of a notorious watchman-turned-highwayman named Santhana Thevan in the western reaches of Madura District.<sup>119</sup> S. Pularusamy Pillai, who penned these verses one year after the capture and execution of the bandit, described in lurid detail how Santhanan and his Kallar companions preyed mercilessly on men and women passing through the lonely paths and mountain passes of the district—

He would walk through jungles  
in the company of bears, tigers and elephants—  
He would grasp and cast away jungle ghosts and goblins  
as if they were nothing—  
Those of the country would flee at the sight of his terrible form  
for fear of what might happen.

These predatory lines were mirrored precisely by the words with which the ballad celebrated the ultimate capture of the brigand by the Village Munsiff of Boothipuram—

Even if the epoch ended would his countless murders  
leave him free to walk the earth?  
[The Munsiff] caught Santhana Thevan in the way that  
a raging elephant is trapped in a pit,

<sup>117</sup> Horsfall to Price, 8 Oct. 1895, GO 473, TNSA.

<sup>118</sup> Radhakrishnan, *Dishonoured by History*, p. 39, and Sen, *Disciplining Punishment*, p. 47.

<sup>119</sup> Pularusami Pillai, *Santhana Thevan Sinthu*.

Thanks to the blessings of His Majesty,  
our Emperor Edward.

Written just a few years after 1896, these similes make for a fascinating, albeit unintentional, echo of the anti-Kallar hunting horn.

Santhana Thevan was a unique figure, an elusive and inveterate jungle bandit. What light might one representation of his terrible nature shed on the motives of the countless villagers who drove away common Kallar labourers, watchmen and even wealthy cultivators? The *Natya Sastra* describes anxiety as a condition of restless doubt and worry, brought about by the loss of dear objects.<sup>120</sup> In the ballad by Pularasamy Pillai, the Kallar bandit was said to inspire flight among the villagers of western Madurai for fear of what *might* happen to their lives and things in his hands. In colonial administrative discourse, the Kallars as a race were said to inspire similar anxieties among the remainder of the population. There are few traces of this sentiment in the colonial archive, due in part to the particular tactics of Kallar depredation—reporting cases of cattle theft to the police, for example, would ruin the possibility of retrieving the stolen animals through the payment of blackmail. However, what was recorded in ample detail was a popular sense of security effected in the movement’s aftermath—

The cessation of theft is simply miraculous. A man may in the dead of night go now from one part of the division to another with valuable properties in his possession without the least fear of encountering any thief. The shepherds sleep soundly in their sheepfolds. Cowherds don’t care to go to their cattle folds in the nights. No body goes and watches his crops during nights. Gardeners leave their leather buckets and other implements in the garden itself with perfect surety to find them safe next morning. Ryots do no more have sleepless anxieties during nights.<sup>121</sup>

While Kallar petitions to the state complained of their sudden and overwhelming vulnerability at the hands of the *kudigal*, these latter subjects were reported to have for the first time a feeling of security in their property and person. Read against the grain, such reports gesture towards a structure of rural sentiments.

In the popular anxieties recorded by official observers of the movement, we find traces of a native stereotyping that both echoed and exceeded state depictions of the predatory Kallar. Colonial administrators took Kallar criminality as a habit that could be settled in time through a careful application of legal constraint and social reform. But the protagonists of the anti-Kallar movement acted on the grounds that the very presence of these castefolk was unsettling. Their problem was one of character. Time and again, British observers declared that the name Kallar—which also means thief in Tamil—was ‘very justly applied’ to the conduct

<sup>120</sup> Rangacharya, *The Natyasastra*, p. 70.

<sup>121</sup> Rajagopal to Batten, 23 May 1896, R. Dis. 90, MDA.

of the caste.<sup>122</sup> Running alongside these colonial pronouncements was a popular assessment of deceitful Kallar proclivities, one that anchored the evident ‘stigma’ attached to being a ‘Kalla fellow’.<sup>123</sup>

The Palni Tahsildar diagnosed these imputed tendencies as a consequence of overweening desire: even prosperous Kallar landowners did not ‘seem to rest satisfied with cultivating their lands’.<sup>124</sup> His statistics showed that most Kallar cultivators also worked as watchmen. The ‘poor ryots’ of Palni paid ‘illegal gratifications’ to these watchmen only to keep the latter from stealing their property. Kallar land tax receipts were therefore deceptive—evidence of their landholding did not mean they had ‘settled to peaceful avocations’. The ryots were said to have seen through this ruse, driving away even the Kallar ryots on the grounds of legitimate suspicion—

The ryots seem to think that by permitting them to reside in the village, reaction would set in and their arrangements to prevent crime would very soon prove futile and there is no guarantee for the future safety of the country. *They consider that they are ryots yet they have thieving propensities born in them.*<sup>125</sup>

The Tahsildar maintained that all Kallars, Valayars and Kuravars tended to help their brethren commit crimes, either passively or actively. It was argued that Kallars would even visit their relations in distant villages solely for the purpose of stealing away with goods and cattle on their return.<sup>126</sup> Public insecurity, it would seem, was a consequence of Kallar disposition—members of the caste naturally tended to prey on their neighbours.

Such native constructions of a propensity to thief fused the name of a caste with a determination of its tendencies in an essential identification. Kallars were deemed constitutionally incapable of giving up their ‘bad habits’, in stark contrast to the anti-Kallars who had vowed to do so when they joined the assemblies.<sup>127</sup> In the spring of 1896, securing the villages of northern and western Madurai meant expelling all Kallars from their bounds. Colonial discourse met native

<sup>122</sup> Turnbull, ‘Account of the Various Tribes of Cullaries’.

<sup>123</sup> Dumergue to Price, 9 Nov. 1895, GO 473, TNSA. As evidence for this claim, one might also turn to *Kamalambal Carittiram*, a Tamil novel written by B.R. Rajam Aiyar and serialised in the Tamil monthly *Vivekacintamani* from Feb. 1893 to Jan. 1895. Rajam Aiyar hailed from the small town of Vatalakundu, in the Periyakulam Taluk of Madurai District, and his realistic depiction of rural Madurai life includes a fictional account of a notorious Kallar bandit. In a satirical exchange between a village Brahmin and the bandit’s uncle, the novelist presents Kallar thievishness as common knowledge: ‘Suppu Tevan: “You’re right there, *cami*. Stealing is our business. You Brahmins chant the Vedas, and we Kallars steal. But is that a reason to turn us in to the police?”’ See *The Fatal Rumour*, p. 77. I am grateful to Preetha Mani for calling this text to my attention.

<sup>124</sup> Palni Tahsildar to Madura District Collector, 27 June 1896, R. Dis. 90, MDA.

<sup>125</sup> Palni Tahsildar to Madura Sub-collector, 27 June 1896, R. Dis. 90, MDA.

<sup>126</sup> Muthusamy Iyer to Batten, 30 May 1896, R. Dis. 90, MDA.

<sup>127</sup> Vedasandur Inspector’s Diary, 15 June 1896, R. Dis. 90, MDA.

sentiment *kakataliya* on racial grounds. The workings of this Manichaeian conjuncture are best illustrated by the following event.

In early June 1896, Veerappen Servai presented a complaint of dacoity against the chief members of the anti-Kallar association and 19 other villagers of Markampatti. Markampatti was a village at the foot of the Karandamalai Hills separating Dindigul and Melur Taluks. Veerappen described himself as a 'big pattadar' [landholder] living at a distance of one furlong from the village. On the morning of the 6th, he alleged, villagers had assembled at the blowing of a horn and entered his house, driven away his bullocks and carried away his vessels and jewels. He had lost goods worth Rs 2,000. Taluk Magistrate Venkateswara Iyer and a party of police started immediately for the village upon receipt of his complaint. Inspecting the house of Veerappen Servai, they found some pots destroyed and a broken granary with grain scattered all over the floor. 'The things were thrown in great confusion'. A large hole had been burnt into the middle of a mattress. Most of the cattle driven away had returned on their own.<sup>128</sup>

An anti-Kallar meeting had been held in the village about a fortnight prior to the alleged dacoity. Veerappen Servai had petitioned to join the association. 'They belong to the class of Veenangalainadu Kallans,' the Tahsildar noted in his report. He and his brothers and cousins had emigrated to the village from the state of Pudukottai in a time of famine a century ago. They did not intermarry with the Kallars of either Usilampatti or Melur. The village *karnam* and others argued on their behalf—they were not Piramalai Kallars, and they should therefore be allowed to join the movement. 'The leaders of the movement asked the complainant to produce letters from the principal inhabitants of his caste'. Veerappen Servai sent men to Ayyampalayam, Venkatalakottai and Kovilpatti to obtain letters proving that men of his caste had been admitted to the associations in those villages. But even before these letters were produced, the association decided that his castemen should not be admitted. As the Tahsildar explained, the chief members 'decided that he is a Kallan'.

Veerappen went personally to Ammayappa Kone, who declared that people of his caste may be admitted to the movement. But the leaders of Markampatti 'refused to act upon it'. One week later, Veerappen heard the sounds of the horn and commotion in the village. Four hundred people approached his house with torches. He and the other inmates of the house fled 'through fear' to the adjoining fields, remaining under the trees throughout the night. 'The mob entered his house'. When Veerappen returned from Dindigul after filing his complaint the next morning, he found that bronze and metal vessels, hoes and hatchets, 29 cocks and some other articles had been 'stolen away'.

Village Munsiff Rajalingam Pillai denied to the Tahsildar that any dacoity had been committed against Veerappen Servai. 'The complainant and his people were not allowed to join the movement as they are Kallans by caste and are men of least

<sup>128</sup> Venkateswara Iyer to Batten, 11 June 1896, R. Dis. 90, MDA.

character'. A washerman named Muthu Karuppen had been entrusted with collecting subscriptions for the anti-Kallar association—he was the eighth accused in Veerappen's complaint. Muthu Karuppen came to the Munsiff on the night prior to the alleged dacoity to tell him that his heap of straw had been set afire and that he suspected the perpetrators were the complainant and his brother. The Munsiff did not investigate this rival claim on the grounds that he suffered from a belly-ache, but he did report the matter to the nearby Station House Officer. The Munsiff of neighbouring Vathalathoppanpatti also denied any claims dacoity against Veerappen Servai. He tried to prove to the Tahsildar that Veerappen and his men were people of 'bad character'—'They were formerly kavalgars of these villages. But as it was found that they themselves committed thefts their services were dispensed with about a year ago'.

Veerappen Servai had described himself as a substantial landowner in his complaint to the police. He reported carefully and meticulously the value of property that had been stolen from him by the villagers of Markampatti. The Divisional Police Inspector had taken on the responsibility of verifying the truth of the claims made by him and the anti-Kallar leaders. What is most interesting about these rival claims is their point of agreement. There was no doubt that Veerappen Servai was a Kallan. Rather than denying this identification, Veerappen sought to prove that he was a respectable Kallar emigré from the nearby principality of Pudukottai, headed by a Kallar sovereign. But the villagers, in 'decid[ing] that he is a Kallan', had decided that he was both a caste member by blood and a thief by inclination.

Veerappen may in fact have been an unscrupulous watchman or perhaps even an oppressive landlord. But it was the fact that he was a Kallan that sealed his fate. To be a Kallan was to be of 'least character'. It was an imagination of a hereditary tendency—his proclivity to prey on others—that was deemed punishable by the village assembly. Suspicions raised by his very nature were enough to suspend the response of the state. The Munsiff with a belly-ache forwarded the complaint from the washerman without investigating its truth. The Tahsildar reserved his judgement concerning Veerappen's claim. The Joint Magistrate wrote in emphatic reply that 'Kallans should have no reason to suppose that their complaints do not receive prompt attention'.<sup>129</sup> Time and again, however, claims such as these were met with scepticism by the men of the state.

Complaining of state indifference to the 'massacre' at Nellore, the 'FACT' writer had raised an indignant question to *The Hindu*—'Are we living under the British Government or not?'<sup>130</sup> The anonymous author wrote on behalf of the aggrieved Kallars, but also on behalf of a principle of British imperial rule that constituted the very grounds of his outrage. As another writer on the topic of the spread of persecutions asserted a few days later '[a]ll the subjects of Her Majesty are equal in the eyes of the law'.<sup>131</sup>

<sup>129</sup> Batten to Venkateswara Iyer, 11 June 1896, R. Dis. 90, MDA.

<sup>130</sup> "Ammayappa Konan's Fund", Or the Persecution of the Kallars', *The Hindu*, 13 June 1896.

<sup>131</sup> T.B. Pandian, 'The Persecution of Kallars', *The Hindu*, 27 June 1896.

The state did in fact articulate a certain notion of equality in response to the agitation. A notice issued in the month of June warned the ryots of the affected Taluks in the following terms—‘The Villagers are informed that Kallars are equally entitled with themselves to live *peaceably* in villages, and that any persecution of Kallars will be punished with the utmost rigour of the law’.<sup>132</sup> But the word ‘peaceably’ was an unavoidable qualification. Kallars bore rights as residents of villages to the extent that they were peaceable. Insofar as they held the others in a state of terror, they forfeited their right to protection. This was indeed an instance of unequal subjection, premised on the ambiguous status of Kallars as subjects of empire. The Kallars were clearly not living *under* the British Government at all, to borrow the topographic figure employed by the complainant to *The Hindu*. They retained the imprint of an ungovernable lawlessness that had the audacity to claim for itself the mantle of protection. As long as other villagers were imagined as subject to the ‘despotism’ of *kaval*, the rights of Kallars as subjects of empire would remain a special question.<sup>133</sup>

### Securing the Countryside

[T]he removal of the yoke the villagers wear, but too quietly, will be a very long business, and it seems to me to be a matter of extreme humiliation that a band of thieves should, after so many years of English rule, be practically holding undisturbed sway in large tracts of British India.

*Tanjore Superintendent of Police, 1895*<sup>134</sup>

A series of reflections on the ‘Present Social Outlook’ published in *The Hindu* in May and June 1896 challenged Indians to give up their ‘instinctive love of every thing handed down to us from generation to generation’. One of these editorials lumped thieving Kallars along with nautch girls, thugs and cannibalistic Fijians as groups of people who mistakenly believed that their profession was an honourable one.<sup>135</sup> It is clear that the movement against the Kallars of Madura District bore some relation to the many currents of social reform galvanising diverse Indian publics at the close of the nineteenth century. One Indian official celebrated the assemblies as ‘volunteer corps’ joined freely by villagers who had found it to their ‘advantage’.<sup>136</sup> A writer to *The Hindu* was more critical—the time had indeed

<sup>132</sup> Notice issued by J.K. Batten, 19 June 1896, R. Dis. 90, MDA.

<sup>133</sup> See, for example, Cardew to Price, 3 Dec. 1895, GO 473, TNSA.

<sup>134</sup> Agar to IGP, Madras, 9 Nov. 1895, GO 473, TNSA, on both Maravar and Kallar watchmen.

<sup>135</sup> ‘Present Social Outlook V’, *The Hindu*, 9 June 1896.

<sup>136</sup> Venkateswara Iyer to Batten, 30 May 1896, R. Dis. 90, MDA.

come to 'try to remove all social evils from our land', but the 'so-called reformer' Ammayappa Kone was mistaken in taking hereditary *kaval* as one of these evils.<sup>137</sup>

Evaluations both positive and negative underscore the striking modernity of the enterprise. These were not the calcified village communities that Henry Maine had described a couple of decades prior as wedded to the laws of 'Authority, Custom, or Chance ... not Contract'.<sup>138</sup> In mobilising against customary village watchmen, the assemblies bent experimental state forms and conventional social relations alike to novel purposes. In this final section I outline some of the hybrid configurations of social and political authority put into play by the assemblies, in particular their policing of rural space. Security was the primary project propelling the anti-Kallar movement, creating a zone of uneasy complicity between state official and popular protagonist. When this governmental aim took on the semblance of a more radical politics of autonomy, the state intervened and robbed the assemblies of their momentum.

As I noted earlier, rural policing in the late nineteenth century was a terrain of accommodation between colonial state and subject. The colonial compromise with native watchmen was one of two ways in which the state economised on the costs of rural administration in the late nineteenth century. A second means of economising were the Local Fund Boards, constituted as institutions of self-government in each district of the Presidency in 1871 and comprising both official and non-official members. These boards were authorised to administer funds levied by the government from local inhabitants for the public purposes of elementary education, sanitation, maintenance of roads and medical aid. The Local Fund Boards were dissolved in 1884 and replaced by a more elaborate hierarchical structure of District, Taluk, and Union Boards, which were now authorised to levy their own local funds. The village Union Boards, for example, consisting of village headmen and other elected and appointed members, applied house taxes to the construction and maintenance of roads, drains, wells, tanks, dispensaries and schools in their jurisdictions.<sup>139</sup>

What is especially striking about the anti-Kallar assemblies is the way in which they challenged the first of these state compromises under the sign of the second. The primary and explicit aim of the assemblies was to address the failure of both watchmen and police to secure village property—as one official observed, 'theft is a common danger affecting them all'.<sup>140</sup> Members were inducted on their swearing of several oaths—not to employ Kallars as watchmen, not to buy stolen property, never to fail in catching thieves. Echoing that fateful question once posed by Sub-magistrate Rajagopal to the leading inhabitants of Vedasandur, the assemblies appointed 'their own men' to watch their villagers instead of Kallars.<sup>141</sup>

<sup>137</sup> T.B. Pandian, 'The Persecution of Kallars', *The Hindu*, 27 June 1896.

<sup>138</sup> Maine, *Village-Communities*, pp. 110–11.

<sup>139</sup> Baliga, *Tanjore District Handbook*.

<sup>140</sup> Rajagopal to Batten, 31 May 1896, R. Dis. 90, MDA.

<sup>141</sup> Nilakottai Sub-magistrate to Madura Sub-collector, R. Dis. 90, MDA.

Each house supplied one able-bodied person for watch duty. One-fourth of the persons thus selected took up *kaval* duty on the village paths in turns during the darker 15 days of each month. The guards would blow a horn to summon others for pursuit in the event of a theft being discovered.

The assemblies also sought to recompense those who lost their properties to thieves, or those who lost their houses or straw heaps to arson. A fund was created for this purpose by each assembly—each ryot paid 12 annas per plough while ‘poor people’ paid 6 annas each. Those who paid income tax contributed fees on their income as estimated by the villagers. The leader of each hamlet was appointed Treasurer of the account collected in his area. The group spearheaded by Ammayappa Kone had gathered together a fund of Rs 250 by the end of May 1896. This sum was described by local officials as ‘a sort of mutual insurance fund’, out of which the value of properties stolen without recovery could be restored to the owner.<sup>142</sup>

The assembly funds substituted for and improved upon the fees that villagers had earlier paid to watchmen. But they also echoed the state’s arrangements for local self-government put in place from 1871 onwards. What was recognised by the state as an anti-Kallar assembly bore the popular name of *pandu kuttam*, or ‘fund assembly’.<sup>143</sup> State officials appear to have neither attempted nor succeeded in explaining this peculiar denomination. *Pandu* is a loanword in Tamil, borrowed directly from the English ‘fund’. It is not entirely clear when this borrowing from English gained currency in popular Tamil.<sup>144</sup> Its usage here in any case appears to have been a reverberation of the Local Funds constituted by the colonial state.<sup>145</sup> Although there is no record of headman Kone’s possible membership in a Union Board, the records do suggest that at least one Taluk Board member—Kistnasami Reddiar—was close enough to the movement to be interviewed by the Superintendent of Police regarding its aims and objectives.<sup>146</sup>

While the agitation may have spread from village to village as a movement against Kallar watchmen, it gained vernacular notoriety as an accumulation of local funds, by means of which ‘*pandu* leaders’ secured the property of their own villages. This was an institutional form that echoed the political arrangements of the state, ‘both in tune and out of tenor with colonial governance’, to borrow the words of Saurabh Dube.<sup>147</sup> Lauded by state officials for ‘producing a feeling of complete security’ among the villagers,<sup>148</sup> the assemblies appropriated the signifier of a state project for efforts that both resembled and unsettled colonial interests in the region. Theirs was an eminently modern exercise in government,

<sup>142</sup> Venkateswara Iyer to Batten, 30 May 1896, R. Dis. 90, MDA.

<sup>143</sup> Palni Tahsildar to Madura Sub-collector, 27 June 1896, R. Dis. 90, MDA.

<sup>144</sup> It has its place in the *Tamil Lexicon* of the 1930s as a word of modern derivation: ‘*Pandu*: Fund; permanent fund; provident fund; endowment’.

<sup>145</sup> I am deeply indebted to Gene Irschick for this suggestion.

<sup>146</sup> Venkateswara Iyer to Batten, 30 May 1896, R. Dis. 90, MDA.

<sup>147</sup> Dube, *Untouchable Pasts*, p. 210.

<sup>148</sup> Ganapathi to Batten, 31 May 1896, R. Dis. 90, MDA.

appropriating both administrative conventions and the threat of violence that underwrote them. At the same time, however, the assemblies also put traditional signifiers of moral authority and rural order into the service of these novel ends.

If anti-Kallar leaders drew the 'fund' from one economy of rule, the plough was an additional device of authority drawn from another. The plough looms in the evictions of Kallars and other putatively thieving castes as a complex and enigmatic sign of territorial sovereignty. The moral preeminence of dominant cultivating communities in the Tamil country has long been anchored in the symbolic virtues of this implement. Older Tamil treatises in verse such as the *Tirukkural* and *Yer Ezhupathu*—literally, 'Seventy Ploughs'—took the plough as a metonym for not only the work of cultivation, but also for an entire social and political order anchored in the rectitude and bounty of the ploughman's furrow.<sup>149</sup> One must be careful in leaping from the claims of such archaic literary representations to the intricacies of more recent social practices. Nevertheless, it appears that the anti-Kallar plough consolidated rural place as a moral terrain, centred around the act of tillage and its economy of laudable prestations.<sup>150</sup>

Towards the end of June 1896, for example, a mass meeting in the village of Thoppanpatti drew around 2,000 people from 16 villages north of Palni. A plough adorned with flowers was fixed into the ground before a Pillaiyar [Ganesh] temple and worshipped. The chief men presiding over the meeting arranged for two or three other men from each of the villages to touch the plough with both hands and repeat a number of oaths. Palni Sub-magistrate J. Ganapathi was on hand to monitor the proceedings. The first oath which one or two men swore was 'not to give room to Kallars, Valayars and Koravars'. The Sub-magistrate asked them what they meant by this. '[I]t was said that they meant that Kallars should not be given room to steal,' he reported. All those who succeeded these men 'put the term as thus qualified'.<sup>151</sup> The Sub-magistrate may have misinterpreted an effort to put down crime, looking for evidence of unlawful ambitions in fact where there were none. But in Tamil, to give room is also to permit. The ryots most likely took advantage of this semantic latitude, artfully turning a policing of space into a figure of speech in order to escape being chastised by a visiting official. Here, as elsewhere, Kallars would be denied a proper place.

To be cast out of such places was to become subject to a range of gestures in social degradation. In some cases asses were driven into the homes of Kallars to force their inmates to leave. Sheep were also sometimes driven into these houses and their occupants falsely accused of theft. 'Low Caste men such as Pariahs and Chucklers' were sent to Kallar homes to warn them to vacate and 'run away' from the villages.<sup>152</sup> Such wilful pollution of domestic space suggests one means by

<sup>149</sup> See, for example, *Tirukkural* no. 1032.

<sup>150</sup> Gloria Raheja describes the threshing ground as a centre of temporal authority in *The Poison in the Gift*. My argument here concerns the historical emergence of a zone of power anchored in the plough rather than the structural coherence of a timeless symbolic order of rural authority.

<sup>151</sup> Ganapathi to Batten, 29 June 1896, R. Dis. 90, MDA.

<sup>152</sup> Muthusamy Iyer to Madura Deputy Magistrate, 28 May 1896, R. Dis. 90, MDA.

which to interpret the denial of service, trade, water and any social intercourse vis-à-vis the Kallars and other castes targeted by the assemblies. Refusals to transact with them indexed their humiliation.<sup>153</sup> One might argue that a more compelling means of abjection could not be found in the traditional Indian social order. To such denials of service by blacksmiths, potters, barbers and washermen, the state could only respond, rather lamely, 'we have no power to interfere in the matter'.<sup>154</sup>

Many of the Piramalai Kallars evicted by the assemblies were recent immigrants to these villages. The terrible famines of 1876–78 had hit the arid stretches of Tirumangalam Taluk particularly hard, forcing countless Kallar families to move north and west in search of livelihood.<sup>155</sup> Such migrations continued at the very moment the movement broke out. One village assembly in the Palni Hills, for example, resolved that Kallars should henceforth be discouraged from coming up to settle from the plains.<sup>156</sup> Measures to secure the countryside from the very presence of these Kallars were a source of acute anxiety for a district administration that had until then watched approvingly as members of the caste 'permanently settled themselves' to cultivation on the remaining land frontiers of the district.<sup>157</sup> There were grave concerns that their displacement might provoke a sudden 'breach of the peace' in any given locality.<sup>158</sup>

Most of the evicted Piramalai Kallar families headed with their cattle, sheep and chattels to the 'Kallar country' of Tirumangalam Taluk, south of the Vaigai River and west of Madurai town. It was widely understood by officials, villagers and observers of the anti-Kallar movement alike that it was in these 'native villages' that they naturally belonged.<sup>159</sup> This *kallar nadu* was a region that the Piramalai Kallar dominated numerically, politically and economically, an area whose territory—as Louis Dumont argued—was itself organised on the basis of Kallar lineage and kinship.<sup>160</sup> Certain Kallar lineages here held deeply formalised rights of *kaval* in the villages to the north and west—the Kallars of Pappapatti Nadu, for example, held a copper plate attesting to their watching rights in the villages of the Kannivadi zamindari.<sup>161</sup>

In May 1896, an army of 1,200 Kallars from Pappapatti marched to Kannivadi to demand the restoration of their kinsmen's *kaval* rights. The very next month, the people of Pappapatti were rumoured to be considering an even more alarming proposal—'rooting out' all people of other castes from Kallarnadu altogether.

<sup>153</sup> This implication would follow from the analysis of Marriott, 'Hindu Transactions'.

<sup>154</sup> Venkateswara Iyer to Batten, 30 May 1896, R. Dis. 90, MDA.

<sup>155</sup> Tirumangalam Taluk, which included the 'Kallar country', lost 15.6 per cent of its population between 1871 and 1881. See David Arnold, 'Dacoity and Rural Crime', p. 156.

<sup>156</sup> Turner to Batten, 17 June 1896, R. Dis. 90, MDA.

<sup>157</sup> Krishnasamy Iyer to Batten, 29 May 1896, R. Dis. 90, MDA.

<sup>158</sup> Madura Sub-collector to Palni Taluk Magistrate, 29 June 1896, R. Dis. 90, MDA.

<sup>159</sup> Muthusamy Iyer to Madura Deputy Magistrate, 28 May 1896, R. Dis. 90, MDA.

<sup>160</sup> This mapping of caste difference onto geographic space appears as a significant mutation of the territorial Kallar political relations identified by Dumont in *A South Indian Subcaste*.

<sup>161</sup> Muthusamy Iyer to Madura Deputy Magistrate, 28 May 1896, R. Dis. 90, MDA.

Intelligence efforts extracted this scenario from snatches of conversation overheard—‘I heard that some of them gave out, that as the Kallars are driven out from other Villages and forced to go back to their native Villages, they would in their turn extirpate the other Caste people from the Kalla Country’.<sup>162</sup> The plan, which perfectly mirrored the eviction of Kallars from the other tracts of Madura District, was eventually dropped as burdensome: Nadars were needed to provision the bazaars, Nattukottai Chettiars were needed to lend money, blacksmiths and carpenters were needed to fashion ploughs, and so on. Kallar leaders were warned against any such ‘conspiracy’, and more stringent police patrols were proposed to deter and contain any such eventualities.<sup>163</sup>

In retrospect, the abortive Pappapatti proposal proves most interesting not in its threat, but in its impossibility. Rural society could be defended against its internal enemies, but designated enemies could not defend themselves against society. The Kallars could not secure for themselves a place of their own. This articulation of caste and territory through an idiom of exclusion—casting particular castes out of certain regions, and closing certain regions to particular castes—may be taken as a significant counterpoint to the nationalist ferment at the turn of the century. If metropolitan elite reformers fortified the boundaries of the private home as a realm of cultural independence, the peasant protagonists of the anti-Kallar assemblies staked their claim to the collective perimeters of the village and its agrarian economy.

To what extent did these exercises in the policing of territory reflect a political desire for anti-colonial autonomy? To be sure, the assemblies pledged to conduct themselves within the bounds of the law when officials were on hand to monitor meetings. Leaders submitted petitions for a stronger, protective police presence.<sup>164</sup> And surprisingly enough, this widespread movement led by farmers appears not to have called the legitimacy of government revenue demands into question even once. Officials such as the Madura Superintendent of Police found reason to celebrate the movement as an instance of ryots freeing themselves from the yoke of Kallar despotism rather than the strictures of the colonial state.<sup>165</sup>

Nonetheless, there were also glimmers of a more radical politics of freedom underscoring the conduct of the assemblies. Groups of men were found rescuing sheep impounded by village officers for grazing on the cut stalks of government avenue trees.<sup>166</sup> The assemblies were reported to have assumed the powers of civil and criminal courts in their areas—adjudicating disputes, forcing Kallars and others to make restitution to aggrieved powers, and making compacts to hide their matters from government servants.<sup>167</sup> Notices warning against any ‘foolish’ conduct failed

<sup>162</sup> Muthusamy Iyer to Madura Deputy Magistrate, 30 May 1896, R. Dis. 90, MDA.

<sup>163</sup> Muthusamy Iyer to Madura Deputy Magistrate, 28 May 1896, R. Dis. 90, MDA.

<sup>164</sup> Extract from the Nilakottai Inspector’s Diary, 19 June 1896, R. Dis. 90, MDA.

<sup>165</sup> Baudry to IGP, 13 Apr. 1896, GO 473, TNSA.

<sup>166</sup> Rajagopal to Batten, 28 May 1896, R. Dis. 90, MDA.

<sup>167</sup> Palni Tahsildar to Madura Sub-collector, 27 June 1896, R. Dis. 90, MDA.

to stem the insistent and violent efforts to drive Kallars out of the region altogether, rather than merely suspending their duties as watchmen.<sup>168</sup>

Troubled by these flashes of an autonomous politics, district officials ultimately intervened against the assemblies' inchoate resistance to the armature of British Raj. The registration of a case against a few anti-Kallar leaders for having stolen away Kallar livestock led the villagers of Thangachiyammappatti to threaten the police in August 1896—

[T]hey will see how the police men will do their work at this Station House ... [T]here are only 4 or 5 Police men and even if they are killed who will give evidence to prove the offence ... [T]hey must prevent bazaar men from selling things to Police men and also prevent barbers and Dhobies from rendering any service to them in the same way as they have done in case of Kullers ... [I]f constables who go on beat singly be killed, who will give evidence ... [I]f the Police arrest defendants in cattle dacoity case 5/20 they will blow horn to assemble a large crowd of villagers and punish the Police men ... [T]hey talked about many other things.<sup>169</sup>

Constables reported that these resolutions were passed not in secret but in their own presence. A subaltern programme of policing ultimately took the watchmen of the state as the object of their tactics.

The district administration continued to single out anti-Kallar leaders on charges of persecution until a violent wave of Kallar reprisals ensued to cow the assemblies into quiescence. As former Kallar antagonists began to flood the District Collector with telegrams for assistance, he noted with resigned misgivings—'we prevent them from protecting themselves in the only way they seem to understand'.<sup>170</sup> Melancholy was the mood of enlightened blackmail. Traces of the movement disappeared from official eyes by March 1897.<sup>171</sup>

### Coda

In his prison notebooks, Antonio Gramsci reflected on a conception of the state as night watchman, limited to safeguarding public order, respect for law and rules of the game. This was a liberal fantasy, he wrote, one that occluded the more pervasive workings of State on the terrain of civil society.<sup>172</sup> Gramsci's metaphor suggests that security is much more than a matter of law. The watchman's primary concerns are not threats from without, but rather the interests and desires

<sup>168</sup> Notice issued by J.K. Batten, 19 June 1896, R. Dis. 90, MDA.

<sup>169</sup> Occurrence report of the Vedesandur Inspector of Police, 17 Aug. 1896, R. Dis. 90, MDA.

<sup>170</sup> Madura District Collector, 16 Oct. 1896, R. Dis. 90, MDA.

<sup>171</sup> Grimley to Madura Deputy Magistrate, 2 Mar. 1897, MCR R. Dis. No. 206/Mgl, 13 Mar. 1897, MDA.

<sup>172</sup> Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, pp. 261–64.

developing from within the realm of his policing.<sup>173</sup> Under colonial conditions this problem doubles, for force and coercion represent both watchman's tactic and native predilection. The blackmail of empire lay in the refusal to relinquish lock and key until all traces of the latter desire were tutored out of the subject population. From the perspective of the state, the evictions of Kallars could only appear immature and foolish in their flaunting of the law. '[T]he assemblies were acting headstrong and ... they overestimated their own powers of action,' wrote the Vedasandur Sub-magistrate.<sup>174</sup> But from the perspective of the assemblies, they were acting under the wing of the state.

Were the cultivators of Madurai rising against the last remnants of an oppressive past, or instead using the scattered members of a marginal caste as unwitting scapegoats? The answer to this question remains ambiguous. Let me close this article by returning to the legacy of Santhana Thevan, protagonist of the *sinthu* I described earlier. Santhana Thevan and his gang were charged by the Madurai District Sessions Judge in 1907 with a number of familiar offences: blackmail in the name of watching, cattle theft, arson, dacoity and a wicked desire to demonstrate to other villagers that 'civil power could not protect them if they dismissed their Kavalgars'. His associates, captured before he was, did not attempt to account for the evidence that had been arrayed against them. Bereft of any witnesses to testify on their behalf, they claimed only that they had been falsely implicated by villagers who were 'bent on driving the Kallars from the neighbourhood'.<sup>175</sup> Their protestations proved futile: all were ultimately executed or exiled to the penal colony on the Andaman Islands.

Against this evidence and the verses discussed earlier, one might juxtapose a third text—the lengthy ballad of Santhana Thevan comprising part of the Kallar oral tradition west of Madurai. In this artifact of folk memory, Santhana Thevan and his brother Mayandi are represented neither as thieving watchmen nor heartless marauders, but rather as light-hearted men not unwilling to teach a harsh lesson to those that refuse them common courtesies like betel and *paan*. Some of the most striking episodes of the ballad come after the pair trap and humiliate a Police Inspector and Head Constable who were charged with capturing them. Santhanan and Mayandi don their uniforms to pass as policemen scouring the countryside for themselves, pausing to dispense justice to exploited plantation workers and even share some liquor and mutton with an English couple in the hills. These exploits culminate in Santhanan impersonating a Madurai magistrate in order to declare a court holiday.<sup>176</sup> The carnivalesque doubling of the state in the figure of outlaw Santhana Thevan evokes both the fecundity and the limits of colonial power. While Kallar *kaval* has outlived the British Raj by several decades in the villages

<sup>173</sup> I use the masculine possessive advisedly here, following Brown, *States of Injury*.

<sup>174</sup> Rajagopal to Batten, 28 May 1896, R. Dis. 90, MDA.

<sup>175</sup> Case 80 of 1906, 1 Oct. 1906, Madurai Sessions Court, in G.O. No. 2049 Misc. Home (Judicial), 9 Dec. 1907, TNSA.

<sup>176</sup> *The Bandit Brothers*.

of rural Madurai, Santhana Thevan himself was not so lucky—he was sentenced to death on 4 April 1907. The liberal state continues to this day to disavow monsters of its own making.

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