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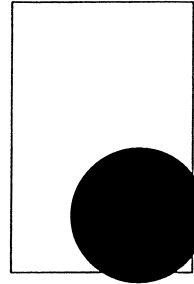
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# Devoted to development

Moral progress, ethical work, and divine  
favor in south India

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## Abstract

The article presents rural citizens in postcolonial India as subjects of development: individuals who must submit themselves to an order of power identifying their own nature as a problem, and demanding that they work to develop themselves in order to overcome the limits of this nature. I discuss three dimensions of such subjection to development: development as a normative order of moral imperatives, as a domain of ethical engagement with oneself, and as a relation to others – state officials, teachers, missionaries, and even deities – with whom the ultimate responsibility for one's progress is invested. Focusing on the colonial experience and postcolonial condition of a particular south Indian community classified as a 'criminal tribe' in the early 20th century, I confront toil as virtue with toil as fate, juxtaposing the moral horizons of state intervention with the cosmological orientations of ordinary cultivators.

## Key Words

agrarian • colonialism • development • devotion • divinity • ethics • India • labor • morality

One of my closest friends in the rural Cumbum Valley of southern India was a young man I rarely saw for more than a few minutes at a time. Jegadisan was always on his way somewhere else: to cut meat for a wage in the mornings, to hire out his speakers and amplifiers for public events in the village, to collect interest on money that he and his wife had lent out, to buy cloth and thread for her tailoring business, to walk their three children to school, or to stock their small grocery store with the cash he had earned behind a liquor store counter in a distant industrial town. He would always pause for a quick chat whenever we ran into each other on the street. And almost invariably, Jegadisan would draw our hurried talk to a close with a terse question, tinged with both anxiety and conviction: 'Will I develop in life?' This question of his, which he spoke countless times, testifies to the inescapable presence of development as an aim of life in

contemporary India. In recent years, certain scholars have announced the death of development as a horizon of collective transformation in a neoliberal world (i.e. Sachs, 1993). Against the backdrop of such arguments, the passions of my friend Jegadisan present a certain kind of puzzle. One might even argue that the idea of development remains the most important object of desire, imagination and struggle in places such as India today.

Underdevelopment is a form of postcolonial identity, Gupta (1998: 11) has suggested, dedicated to the overcoming of a backward, deficient, and inadequate nature. This article too presents rural citizens in postcolonial India as 'subjects' of development: individuals who must submit themselves to an order of power that identifies their own nature as a problem and demands that they work to develop themselves in order to overcome the limits of this nature.<sup>1</sup> In the following pages, I discuss three dimensions of such subjection to development: development as a normative order of moral imperatives, as a domain of ethical engagement with oneself, and as a relation to others – state officials, parents, teachers, missionaries and even deities – with whom the ultimate responsibility for one's progress is invested. I take development, in other words, as a moral strategy, a terrain of ethics, and a relation of power. What is at stake in this moralizing relation to oneself and to others, I will argue is the promise of an improvement of life and the fulfillment of its potential for progressive growth (Rist, 1997). Both the politics and the ethics of such development in India and elsewhere lie in the articulation of – and struggle among – rival understandings of such potential and the conditions for its proper realization. To come to terms with the force of such competing horizons is to cast the developmental demands of the present in a deeper historical perspective.

Throughout this article, I focus on the modern condition of the south Indian caste into which Jegadisan was born, the Piramalai Kallars, a community of several hundred thousand individuals, living mainly in the villages and towns of the Cumbum Valley and the Madurai plains in the Tamil country of southern India.<sup>2</sup> Blamed for habitual cattle theft, blackmail, and highway robbery by British colonial officials throughout the 19th century, the entire caste was designated a 'criminal tribe' between 1918 and 1947. For nearly 30 years, all Piramalai Kallar men were fingerprinted, required to report for regular roll calls and prohibited from leaving their villages for any reason without written permission, regardless of whether or not they had been convicted of any crime. These extraordinary measures in colonial policing were supplemented by an array of state experiments in moral and material uplift, including a prominent use of agrarian strategies of cultivating virtue. It was here on the edge of Jegadisan's village – Kullappa Gounden Patti – that an agricultural reformatory settlement was established for the Kallars under American missionary supervision in 1917. In what follows, I trace the premises of these colonial strategies and some of their ironic and unintended post-colonial fruit in the region today. The subject of development yielded by these interventions, I argue, is one marked ineluctably by the traces of multiple moral horizons.

The larger manuscript project from which this article is drawn (Pandian, forthcoming) concerns a series of virtues that have oriented both these colonial moral projects and the ways in which their postcolonial heirs have grappled with their legacies. Here, I focus on the virtue of toil, taken in turn as a moral horizon, an ethical disposition, and a matter of divine favor. 'The Kallars are as a class intelligent but they are a lazy and ease-loving people. They are to be goaded and driven to work', a Tamil Police

Superintendent appointed to supervise the social reform of the caste wrote in 1923.<sup>3</sup> The first substantive section of the article describes how such ideologies of toil were mobilized by official and missionary strategies to transform the moral character of the Kallars in the early 20th century.<sup>4</sup> The second section turns to the ways in which certain heirs to these endeavors conceive of toil today as an ethical orientation of the developmental self. The final section juxtaposes toil as virtue with toil as fate, showing how cultivators in the region attribute responsibility for their labors to the intercession of deities and cosmic forces. Each of these sections is meant to underscore an ineluctable intimacy of the moral and the material in development, as well as the plural horizons orienting such visions of progress in south India today. Before addressing these themes, let me say a few words about what it might mean to conceive of modern development as a terrain of moral subjection.

### DEVELOPMENT AS AN ETHOS

Prominent anthropological critiques of development in the 1990s (e.g. Sachs, 1993; Ferguson, 1994; Escobar, 1995) focused on the powerful discourses and institutional apparatuses that had schematized official developmental aims and practices in the decades following the Second World War. Many of these critiques looked toward the possibility of articulating a collective future beyond these entrenched and deceptively neutral horizons, toward what Escobar (1992), for example, described as a 'post-development era'. These scholarly works were crucial in unsettling the apparent benignity of anthropological participation in the surveillance and management of a putatively underdeveloped world (Escobar, 1991). But at the same time, as Moore (1999) has observed, such writings also served at times to obscure deep continuities between more recent strategies and older histories of colonial and capitalist intervention, while further occluding the intense political struggles through which both the promises and the exclusions of these legacies continue to be negotiated in the present.

More recently, a number of scholars have turned to the work of Michel Foucault (1991) on the subject of 'governmentality' as a means of wrestling with these deeper histories of improvement and welfare in colonial and postcolonial settings. Foucault's emphasis on the governmental 'conduct of conduct' in modern times has opened up a wide range of sites for critical scrutiny, from the rationality of urban planning and public health in colonial Egypt (Mitchell, 1988, 2002), to the workings of forest bureaucracies in tropical Asia (Li, 1999; Agrawal, 2005), to the official management of rural lands and livelihoods in southern Africa (Moore, 2005). Such studies have attended both to the political rationality of particular strategies of welfare (Scott, 1995) and to the subjects of development constituted by means of such interventions. These works have renewed attention to what Moore (2005) has described as the 'micro-politics' of development: the myriad social, political, and spatial practices through which programs of improvement are imposed, exercised, negotiated, and contested.

These politics have often concerned relations between the material transformation of environments and the moral improvement of their inhabitants. As Drayton (2000) has argued, 18th-century European proponents of a nascent science of statecraft proposed the government of nature as a crucial instrument of collective human welfare. Agrarian ideologists pressed for the scientific management of fields and forests in order to generate national prosperity, but also to improve the moral qualities of the body politic.<sup>5</sup> By the

late 19th century, European powers throughout the globe regularly sought to moralize the human beings they ruled by making their environments into vehicles of pedagogy: be they agricultural colonies for urban paupers in France (Crossley, 1991), nursery school gardens for young children in Germany (Herrington, 1998), or plantations for the tropical subjects of British colonialism (Chatterjee, 2001). The project to improve the natural world of the colonies along with the nature of their inhabitants lay at the heart of the imperial enterprise in Africa, Asia, and the Americas. The moral failings of colonial subjects were often blamed on the degenerate qualities of their tropical environments, just as the untilled worthlessness of these landscapes was easily attributed to the indolence of their native residents (Pratt, 1985). On such landscapes, good government promised a yield of both moral and material fruit.

In what follows, I build on these insights by examining agrarian strategies of moral pedagogy in colonial south India. At the same time, however, I also follow upon an aspect of Foucault's writings on government that has won insufficient attention among scholars of development. In one of his final interviews, Foucault (1997: 225) described governmentality as an 'encounter' between two domains: 'technologies of domination of others and technologies of the self', the latter of which were to be understood as 'the mode of action that an individual exercises upon himself'. Governmentality, in other words, appears in modern times as a zone of intersection between the domain of power and the domain of ethics. While many studies of development inspired by this concept have investigated state practices such as statistical calculation, economic manipulation, natural resource management, population control, and other exercises in collective welfare and hygiene, few have focused closely on the ways in which people come to subject themselves to such developmental imperatives. My contention in this article is that morality may be identified as the terrain of encounter between developmental power and development as an ethos. It is in the realm of the moral that development emerges as an incitement to work upon oneself.

There is of course a certain paradox in this assertion that we must slowly unravel, for developmental practices have clearly entailed, first and foremost, work upon *others*: a relation of 'trusteeship', as Cowen and Shenton (1996) have stressed, in which certain agents assume responsibility for the progress of those in their care. Cowen and Shenton emphasize the moral dimensions of this relationship as it emerged in the 19th-century: a concern with social order, for example, among the Saint-Simonian reformers of Europe and Latin America. The normative underpinnings of European civilizing missions throughout the colonized world are also readily identifiable, in the dissemination and circulation of virtues such as thrift, industry, reason, and prudence (Cooper and Stoler, 1997). But any examination of colonial circumstances would quickly reveal deep and abiding tensions between rival agents of such moral responsibility: between army officers, Anglican missionaries, and plantation managers in the Argentinean Chaco, for example, as Gordillo (2004) has insisted. Such 'tensions' of trusteeship underscore Bornstein's claim (2003) that the religious and the economic are separable in development only from the vantage point of a modernization theory premised upon a necessary secularization. I am concerned in this article with how these two domains are articulated together in particular instances of moral trusteeship and transformation.

In spite of their empirical diversity and complexity, particular relations of trusteeship can only be exercised against the backdrop of more general conceptions of the potential

ends of governmental care and attention. In the broadest sense, development in the modern West has always relied upon an understanding of history itself as a general course of progress toward maturity and perfection. 'Progress' appeared as a 'collective singular' in the 18th century, Reinhart Koselleck (2002) has observed: a name for the universal horizon of possibility toward which humanity in general was understood to be capable of developing under the right conditions. Koselleck argues that in Europe, this modern concept of a worldly *progressus* displaced an earlier idea of a Christian spiritual *profectus* – the perfection of the soul. At the same time, however, Koselleck notes that experience of a worldly progress has always been partial and uneven, accompanied by insistent critiques of contemporary moral decay and decline: 'It was noticed again and again', he writes (2002: 235), with respect to discussions among self-identified progressives from the 17th century onward, 'that morality hobbled along behind technology and its development'. Moral conditions, in other words, emerge as the most durable sign of developmental deficits. It is here, I would argue, that the perfection of the self or soul reappears as an aim of modern progress.

It is clear, for example, that numerous development efforts in colonial and post-colonial Asia and Africa have been greatly inspired by Christian conceptions of virtue, not only in the case of overt proselytizing but also in more mundane endeavors such as schooling, medicine, and cooperative economic production (e.g. Bornstein, 2003). Such instances may draw together worldly and spiritual progress as conjoined aims of life, or – as in the Papua New Guinean case discussed by Robbins (2004) – oppose terrestrial prosperity to the possibility of an ultimate salvation to work toward. In any case, as many of these studies have shown, the moral horizons of development intervention rarely reflect an outright imposition of western values on non-western places. Rather, subjects of development conceive its ends at the interstices of rival moral orders. The Melanesian Urapmin, as Robbins (2004) argues for example, were drawn to both Christian salvation and material progress in the first place on account of a disposition toward humiliation lodged within their own indigenous cosmology. One might also consider the Bhils of western India as described by Mosse (2005), who relied on the moral authority of a local goddess cult to challenge the normative premises of a British participatory development project. In both of these cases, directions of social and self-reform are negotiated among the moralizing forces of contrary cultural formations.

One of the most durable and productive ways in which studies of development have taken morality as a site of negotiation is through the notion of a 'moral economy'. Drawing on Thompson's elaboration (1991) of the social expectations through which market relations were regulated and contested by the 18th-century English working classes, Scott (1976) and many others since have drawn attention to subsistence and reciprocity in rural milieus as moral rights and norms. Scott (1976: 192) identified peasant uprisings against capitalist agrarian development as the expression of a 'moral vision, derived from experience and tradition, of the mutual obligations of classes in society'. There are, however, three related problems with this classic formulation. It takes for granted the identity and interests of the actors concerned, both as individuals and as constituents of a collective body. It does this, one might argue further, by also taking for granted the status of moral claims as known and acknowledged obligations. And this assumption rests in turn upon a broader presumption that moral economies are secular rather than religious in their nature – that they involve, that is, tacit agreements among

known and knowable agents.<sup>6</sup> Instead of making these same presumptions, we might ask instead how such normative expectations come to matter in the first place to agents caught up in moments of change. It is here that an understanding of development as an ethic of selfhood proves useful.

To be sure, development may be identified as a series of obligations imposed upon postcolonial subjects by state agencies, economic compulsions, and social elites, as well as by communal expectations. At the same time, however, development may also be understood as a moral *telos* toward which individuals and collectives direct themselves through a critical reworking of their own natures. It is this latter realm of reflexive work that Foucault (1990) named the domain of ethics: the practices by means of which one conducts oneself in relation to prescriptive codes. 'It took twenty years for two billion people to define themselves as underdeveloped', Ivan Illich has said (Escobar, 1991: 675). There may be something misleading about the temporal horizon and social reach of this claim – indeed, I have attended here to pluralize the conditions under which such assessments might be made – yet it also raises a series of crucial questions concerning development as an ethical horizon. What does 'development' *mean* (Pigg, 1992; Sahlins, 1992; Walley, 2003) for the lives of its subjects? In relation to what ideals and expectations do subjects of development imagine themselves as underdeveloped? What aspects of their own existence do they take as evidence of this condition? Through what practices do they seek to rework and rehabilitate this terrain? Lastly, and perhaps most challengingly, with what agency do they entrust the ability to bring about such maturation?

In what follows, I argue that the Piramalai Kallars of south India emerge as subjects of development between rival moral horizons of toil. On the one hand, I chart the workings of a 'long and arduous process of education' (Weber 1992: 62) through which colonial state officials and Christian missionaries sought to inculcate hard work as a moral end in itself. On the other hand, I also trace the histories of a rival understanding of toil itself as a condition of suffering to be escaped through the intercession of chance and divine agency. Subaltern deeds in India retain the imprint of gods, spirits and other supernatural forces, Chakrabarty (2000) has observed, even as they are recast as modern and secular acts of labor. The following pages concern moral subjects of a hybrid work of virtue, their vision of development and the means of its attainment 'braiding' together (Guha, 1997) the living force of multiple imaginations. I must also stress, however, that the forms of toil that I discuss do by no means exhaust the moral life of the community at present. For example, it is widely alleged in the region that the unprecedented degree of prosperity and prominence now enjoyed by many of the Kallar caste depends upon their willingness to pursue 'crooked paths' such as smuggling, racketeering, and other illicit trades. Such ironic and contradictory outcomes only underscore the force of contingency in rendering development a site of both moral struggle and material progress.

## EXPERIMENTS IN AGRARIAN PEDAGOGY

Progress was a consistent and abiding rationality of colonial rule in India (Ludden, 1992). With its establishment under the British Crown in 1858, the Government of India was required to submit a statement to Parliament each year detailing the 'Moral and Material Progress of India' (Zachariah, 2005). Agrarian development was one of the



central means of attaining both dimensions of such transformation. Throughout most of the Madras Presidency in southern India, for example, the state had granted private property rights for land to individual *ryots* or cultivators rather than large landlords, on the grounds that the former would labor most closely over their parcels and extract from them the 'greatest possible produce' (Munro in Firminger, 1984: 449). Their toil was understood to yield both economic and moral returns, generating revenue but also serving as an example and spur to others on the margins of the agrarian order. Let us look more closely at how labor on the land served as an instrument of Kallar moral uplift.

Developmental strategies – schools, cooperatives, occupational training centers, loans and other forms of rural credit – were part and parcel of policing efforts to 'wean' Kallars from crime. Official reformers enlisted the rural environment as a crucial tool in these endeavors. It was clear to local officials that the Kallars were 'generally not wanderers' like other marginal groups classified under the Criminal Tribes Act.<sup>7</sup> The problem here appeared to lie in the failure of land to yield sufficient returns. As one senior police official averred in 1915, 'the root cause of their criminality is pressure on the soil'.<sup>8</sup> The arid, rocky, and infertile reaches of their villages were deemed incapable of supporting all those Kallar households that depended upon them, leaving behind a 'surplus population' with no choice but to depend on crime for its survival.<sup>9</sup> In this Malthusian imagination of social disorder and its natural underpinnings, shifting the balance between population and environment promised the possibility of social change. As one senior Madras Presidency official insisted in 1917, 'the Kalla evil is largely an agrarian one and may be best met by agrarian remedies'.<sup>10</sup>

By this time, police and revenue officials had settled on the idea of a collective agricultural settlement as the most effective among agrarian remedies for Kallar criminality. Although the strategy dated back to at least the 1830s in British India, desertions from such early ventures were rife, propelled by oppressive police surveillance and the torment of usurious and rack-renting landlords (Freitag, 1991). The intercession of the Salvation Army encouraged a revival of the strategy under the aegis of the Criminal Tribes Act of 1911. In the newer agricultural and industrial enterprises managed by such mission agencies, settler labor was forcibly extracted through a 'Gospel of Compulsion' intended to produce both economic and moral value. Missionary ideology converged with pecuniary interests in the cheap work of a tethered and permanent population. By the late 1920s, over 60 official settlements – most only slightly less repressive than jails – held 31,000 inmates throughout British India (Radhakrishna, 2001). In these enterprises, a willingness to toil was taken as the clearest evidence that settlers had attained 'an honest means of livelihood'.<sup>11</sup>

In the western reaches of the Madurai countryside, officials identified a 1200-acre tract of government land at the head of the Cumbum Valley as suitable for a 'voluntary' settlement of 170 Kallar families.<sup>12</sup> The agency entrusted with its management was the American Madura Mission. Fanning outwards from their Boston headquarters, mission workers disseminated the truths of a Calvinist theology reworked to suit the rationalist spirit of 19th-century New England (Hutchison, 1987; Blaufuss, 2003). Like overseas evangelists in other imperial settings, American Madura Mission workers insistently represented their efforts using agricultural images and metaphors – a harvest of Indian souls, for example, 'Waiting for the Reapers'.<sup>13</sup> But the Mission also engaged in



numerous practical ventures in rural development: boarding schools, medical dispensaries, industrial training centers, and model farms meant to provide an 'object-lesson' for native neighbors.<sup>14</sup> American workers were also closely involved with the local state project of Kallar Reclamation. For decades, much of their official correspondence from the region dwelt on the unique challenge of making 'worthy citizens' of the Kallars.<sup>15</sup>

In 1917, American missionary Edward P. Holton was picked as a suitable manager for the Kallar Voluntary Settlement in the Cumbum Valley. Like most of his colleagues in the Mission, Holton freely identified Kallars as the 'Robber' or 'Thief Caste', describing the community as an 'Indian equivalent of New York's "gun-men"' in an effort to make sense of them to his American friends and family.<sup>16</sup> With the Kallars as with his other south Indian wards, Holton placed his personal and professional faith in the benevolent force of a virtuous milieu and the moral conduct to be cultivated within it. His deep commitment to the promise of moral education and other practices of 'Christian Nurture' was likely indebted to the writings of the influential 19th-century Hartford Congregationalist Horace Bushnell, who had argued that grace was best cultivated within the 'ductile' hearts of children through the exercises of a 'Christian atmosphere' (Bushnell, 2001).<sup>17</sup> In south India, Holton found in the practice of agriculture, as with education, a gradual means of developing among his flock both virtue and prosperity 'a better scale of living, for those who are willing to work for it, that is, development of character'.<sup>18</sup>

'It is as a sort of a sub-pro-tem penologist that I am marooned here 60 miles from the nearest white folks of my acquaintance', Holton wrote in a nevertheless buoyant missive from the Cumbum Valley in 1917.<sup>19</sup> Shortly after his arrival that year, two rows of eight rooms were raised and thatched for settlers and their families, along with a schoolhouse and teacher quarters. Within a few months, 19 Kallar convict males, many along with their wives, parents, and children, had been settled in these rows. An office writer, medical officer, primary school teacher, and several policemen were on hand to assist the Reverend in his pastoral duties. But the role of 'Big Brother', as he described it, fell primarily to the missionary himself –

I have had to be doctor, legal, financial and agricultural adviser, stimulator to industry, generator of hope, courage and enthusiasm, sanitary engineer, town-planner, surveyor, architect, horse-doctor and intimidator of predatory influences, within and without. Food-purveyor and general accountant, as a matter of course, fell to my lot.<sup>20</sup>

While Holton conceded that open conversions to Christianity were a difficult prospect, he claimed to have won the confidence and affections of his Kallar wards. Shaken 'out of pettiness, laziness and the constant danger of slumping into mendicancy', none appeared to have lapsed into crime under his eye.<sup>21</sup>

One of the primary instruments of such moral education in the settlement was of course cultivation. Agrarian work was undertaken at first on a communal basis, with the future promise of individual plots of land, 'given good conduct', as the missionary put it, 'each shall enjoy to the full the fruits of his labor'.<sup>22</sup> The fruits of such toil were meant again as both moral and pecuniary returns. A visiting officer from the Department of Agriculture outlined a year-round cropping schedule that would keep Kallar men and

women alike engaged in honest work. The linchpin of this system was a continuous cycle of agricultural tasks intended to distract the cultivator from more customary temptations ‘When he is idle naturally, he will brood over his past engagements with his robber friends. He may be tempted to try his own story. But if he is kept engaged in his own land throughout the year, I think this can be avoided’. The officer encouraged Holton himself to cultivate his own parcel of land, to be undertaken as an object lesson and ‘a model which the others can copy’.<sup>23</sup> Despite such expert counsel, however, harvests on the settlement proved largely a failure.

‘This is a land of good intentions, and the unexpected’, Edward Holton had written optimistically in June 1917.<sup>24</sup> The Kallar Voluntary Settlement appears to have been condemned, however, by malaria rather than by the limits of its agricultural practice. An epidemic broke out in the Cumbum Valley almost immediately after the camp was inaugurated: prostrating the manager and almost the entire population of staff and settlers, killing one child and driving several settlers away. Official studies concluded that little could be done to eradicate the disease from the locality, and all staff were withdrawn from the settlement by the middle of the next year.<sup>25</sup> Seven settlers stayed on with their families and possessions, tilling the lands that they had been assigned by the state. Today, 80 years after the closure of the Kallar Voluntary Settlement, almost none of the lands once granted to the settlers remain in the hands of their descendants. Most of the original settlers and their families appear to have left the area without a trace. How then are we to grapple with its legacies for the present?

What I wish to do now is to shift from this preceding discussion of one pole of the ‘governmentality’ outlined by Foucault to an engagement with the other: from ‘technologies of domination of others’ to ‘technologies of the self’ (Foucault 1997: 225). Let us turn to the recollections of some of the descendants of those who remained in the vicinity of the colonial Kallar settlement. What emerges from their narratives, I will argue, is a sense of toil as a necessary ethos of the developmental self.

### FOR AN ETHICS OF TOIL

There are few physical traces of the Kallar Voluntary Settlement in the Cumbum Valley today. Besides the remains of an abandoned well, there are only English place names marking the site of the venture on the southern edge of Kullappa Gounden Patti village: the ‘Bungalow’ Ridge corner of the village, for example, where the colonial-era buildings would have stood. The lanes of this Bungalow Ridge today are dominated by the descendants of ‘Settle’ Karuppa Thevar, one of the few original settlers who had stayed on in the area. Eldest among them was Karuppa Thevar’s son Pekkathi Mayandi, born in one of the row of houses around 1917 just after his parents had been brought here from the east. In our many conversations, Pekkathi never said much about his father other than that the man was a ‘scoundrel’ who had threatened and stolen from others. ‘Settle’ Karuppa Thevar had drunk and gambled all his possessions away until nothing remained of the 8.74 acres of land assigned to him by the colonial state. ‘Great rowdies!’ Pekkathi exclaimed sharply whenever I raised the subject of this history.

Like many other elders in the village, Pekkathi and his wife Mayakkal remember Edward Holton as *kutta durai* – the ‘short white man’ who had tried to make the settlers into good men, or more simply, into men. But in the recollection of these heirs to his endeavors, life in the erstwhile Kallar Voluntary Settlement seems to have been far

different from an apprenticeship in agrarian rigor. Husband and wife took turns describing the ironies of the past in a lively conversation one afternoon:

Mayakkal [The white man] brought them here and built them good houses and a *bungalow* and a well in that place. Each week one goat. Each week, gave them 2 kg rice, a can of oil. [The settlers] ate and bathed well, rubbed coconut oil on their bodies, ate that mutton and slept as they wished.

I exclaimed Comfortably!

Mayakkal Comfortably, how else! . . . The white man gave each one 12 acres of fields. Must be ploughed, no? But giving rice, giving goats – if the whole place kept on eating this would they be able to plough? . . .

Pekkathi From anyone's field [the settlers would] pluck cotton, take the crop that came. Only if they tended to their own work would they be men. What if I came and scooped up the crop that you had raised? . . .

Mayakkal They didn't want to work, and left the *bungalow* just like that.

Pekkathi These thieving fellows, who would not bend to work. Would they work? They left it all just like that and ran off.

Settlers are said to have brandished sticks to extort grain from other cultivators in the area rather than bending their backs to till and weed their own lands. Such narratives emphasize both the failure of the missionary to make his wards work, and that of the settlers to learn to act deliberately in relation to the likely consequences of their deeds. Freely sharing with the settlers all that they wanted, *kutta durai* in retrospect appears to have neglected to instill either a desire or a necessity to toil, neglected, that is, to transform a moral horizon of intervention into an ethical disposition of the self.

From the vantage point of these two heirs to the moralizing project of the colonial state and its missionary allies in south India, the shortcomings of the settlement lay in its failure to cultivate toil among its wards as an ethical practice of everyday life. These recollections therefore shed an indirect light on how development may be construed by its subjects as a critical work upon one's own inclinations. Pekkathi himself, for example, was well known for his inclination toward toil or *uzhaippu*. Having worked for decades as a woodcutter, watchman, and wetland irrigator for leading cultivators in the village, he was nearly on his deathbed by the time I concluded my dissertation fieldwork in 2002, victim of a caustic cleaning powder that had been corroding his intestines since he accidentally ingested it a few years back. Whenever we spoke, he would have to gather his breath for each sharp burst of a few short words, skin hanging like folds of paper from emaciated bones. And yet, others told me that as late as the previous year, the old man had to be restrained by his sons from rushing out with a loincloth and spade to work on the family fields. 'They've broken my legs and made me sit here', he complained one evening as we sat chatting beside his bed.

The euphemism at the heart of this lament suggests that Pekkathi had indeed cultivated a disposition as a toiler: one who had to be forced to stop working, against the will and tendency of his own body. He insisted to me, however, that this was a quality

that he had absorbed not from the servants of a developmental state but rather from the example of the settled cultivators of the Cumbum Valley. 'My life, I advanced in life only by means of agrarian citizens', he argued.<sup>26</sup> Pekkathi was referring here to the leading cultivators of the Gounder caste, a dominant community around whose landholdings both the agrarian economy and the social order of the region's villages had been organized for centuries. He fiercely distinguished himself from other Kallar households who had settled in the village in the 19th and 20th centuries, blaming them for yielding easily to theft and to the tugs of sensual desire. For many decades, Pekkathi told me, he had instead struggled to guard Gounder crops and cattle, water their fields, borrow their money and pay it back promptly, following their customs and earning their trust and respect. 'If I stay with you for a few years I learn your language. Just like that'. It was through their model and with their trust that he had learned to conduct himself as a laboring subject. And yet, in our conversations Pekkathi would often invoke yet another agency that further complicated the field of trusteeship orienting his struggles to develop himself and family.

'Only if you suffer on the earth will [its crops] ripen', Pekkathi insisted to me. But this was neither an assertion of labor as a calling nor an argument that hard work would pay off in an instrumental sense. Pekkathi was not asserting that toil should be taken as an end in itself, as Weber (1992) had famously characterized the Protestant work ethic. Nor was he suggesting that work served as a means of producing valuable ends in a strictly economic fashion. Instead, the aphorism bore the traces of a karmic cosmology of consequence, one in which suffering bore fruit through the intercession of fate, chance, and divinity (Babb, 1983). 'Those who take crooked paths will wither, while those of good nature will find an open path even through the thorns', Pekkathi maintained in the midst of another chat. One had to toil with the faith that one's reward would come from elsewhere. His invocation of hard work, in other words, partly echoed the developmental premises of colonial intervention, only to displace its efficacy into an alternative economy of force and consequence.

In recent years, prosperity had finally come to the descendants of *Settle* Karuppa Thevar. Many now tended their own orchards and wetlands, while others had opened tea stalls, grocery stores and loan offices along the main road of the village. The old man understood these achievements as arbitrary acts of divine favor rather than as necessary consequences of his own toil. God had played a crucial role in his family's changing fortunes. 'Iswaran is like a signalman', Pekkathi said, comparing the deity to a railway employee charged with sending trains down different tracks. 'If he sees something bad he will turn away. But he helped us a little. Seeing his face, all of us flourished'. In philosophical terms, hard work was a necessary but insufficient condition for the 'ripening' of both crops and humans alike. In this imagination, the causes of such development lay beyond the exertions of the cultivator, falling in the domain of chance, divine will, and natural order.

With the image of an auspicious gaze, Pekkathi had invoked the power of *darsan*: understood in various strands of Indian religious tradition as a line of force passed from deity to devotee through the path of eyesight (Eck, 1998). Colonial officers, like malevolent demons, were said to wither crops and ruin families simply by casting eyes in their direction. The look of a kinder god, on the other hand, could make crops and persons alike thrive. In insisting that the earth would ripen only for those who had

suffered, Pekkathi Mayandi Thevar implied that the gods would look most kindly upon those who had struggled for a living. I want to turn now to a closer examination of this domain of divinity and its relevance for the moral horizons of development in post-colonial India. What we find here, I will argue, are the lineaments of a broader economy of trusteeship, one in which toil stands as both ethical virtue of everyday life and as sign of a terrestrial fate from which one may be freed by divine intercession. To fully grasp both these dimensions, we must pay closer attention to the many shifting meanings of 'toil' itself in south India.

### TERRESTRIAL SUFFERING AND SYMPATHETIC CARE

Toil or *uzhaippu* is a ubiquitous presence in 20th-century Tamil social and political discourse on the subject of individual and collective development. A sampling of popular book titles found in major libraries and published in Tamil in the last century – *Toil Alone Yields Greatness; The Victory of Toil; Toil and Greatness; Those Who Rose Through Toil; One Who Rose Through Toil; Toil Alone Is Greatness* – suggests its prominence as a contemporary key to advancement. Contemporary works such as these write of the subject as though toil has always been an object of praise in south Indian moral tradition. Curiously, however, the term *uzhaippu* or 'toil' is entirely absent in the canonical Tamil literature on virtue compiled in early and medieval times. These works – still influential today – praised zeal and perseverance as virtues while at the same time reproaching those who acted with a heightened attachment to the results of their deeds (Pandian, forthcoming). Such ambivalence betrays a crucial shift in the modern meaning of toil in Tamil, one that deserves careful attention.<sup>27</sup>

The term *uzhaippu* itself is far more prominent in the canon of Tamil devotional literature, from early and medieval works through to the 19th century. In these texts, *uzhaippu* is used primarily as a sign of hardship and suffering. One hymn in the medieval *Tiruvacakam*, for example, presents a devotee lamenting his *uzhaippu* to the Lord Siva in the following terms: 'If this man of cruel deeds suffers is there any return for it?' (Tiruvacakan, 1991: no. 496). Other works describe such suffering once again as the consequence of desire for the fruit of worldly acts, an attachment to be overcome only by full devotion to the worship of the deity. In a 15th-century hymn, for example, former merchant and renunciant Pattinattar implores Siva for release from a life of endless running, searching and useless toil or suffering (Kalyanasundaram, 1998: 84). Agrarian *uzhaippu* appears in such works as an emblem of misplaced desire rather than as an object of praise. Thus Ramalinga Adigal in the 19th century bemoans his ignorant suffering among the world's enticements: experienced in the manner of a bull, he says, tethered to a farmer's plough (Manikkam, 2002: 283).

There is therefore something curious in contemporary Tamil praise of *uzhaippu* as a means of development. Suffering for the fruit of action has been transformed from an object of condemnation into an object of veneration. Fully accounting for this profound change of meaning is difficult. The rise of a colonial capitalist order rewarding the exertions of certain individuals with property and greater wealth has no doubt exercised a decisive influence. Christian campaigns in moral improvement – such as early 20th-century pedagogic materials representing *uzhaippu* as 'The Gospel of Strenuous Life' (Zook, 2000: 71), or the colonial campaign that I have just discussed – are another significant factor no doubt. The celebration of suffering and toil for the collective good

of the nation in Tamil nationalist oratory, prose and poetry (Ramaswamy, 1997) must also be considered. Rural Tamil men and women today identify *uzhaippu* as a means of advancing oneself through diligence, bodily exertion and honest struggle. The term is still invested nonetheless with a sense of suffering meant to be escaped, less a life to be chosen freely and more a consequence of fate, chance and divine will. In this final section of this article, I want to sketch how this imagination of toil places development itself within a divine economy of trusteeship.

The public rhetoric of development in India presents toil as a dependable means of advancement. This promise is belied in rural environments by the tremendous uncertainty of agrarian livelihood. Cultivators in the contemporary Cumbum Valley routinely describe agriculture as a game of chance: yielding as unpredictably as a lottery ticket, a dice game, or a round of cards. The returns of cultivation often utterly failed to make up for the labor of eliciting them. Seasonal rains would neglect to water dry upland crops as anticipated. Outbreaks of disease would easily sweep through wide swaths of irrigated paddy raised from government seed. Orchard growers would find themselves entirely at the mercy of market prices fluctuating with global cycles of production and demand. Certain farmers identified nothing more in these events than the workings of blind chance. Many others found traces here of gods toying with human fate. For these latter men and women, the cultivated landscape yielded ample testimony to the moral order of the cosmos and its lessons for a life of development.

A cone-shaped hill looms on its own over the plains in the south of the valley, its wide slopes tapering like a pile of grain. This was once a massive heap of threshed rice, I was told every now and then: its wealthy yet stingy owner had refused to share even a handful with the Lord Siva – passing by disguised as a mendicant – and the deity punished him by turning it to stone. Such tales serve as reminders that there is a principle of justice at work within the capricious nature of rural livelihoods. ‘I looked to those mountains to raise my children’, woodcutters may say, implying that the hills had graced them in turn with a benevolent glance. Petty crop thieves may argue that fields will produce more in one corner to make up for what they have plucked out of need or desperation from another. Cultivators might insist with karmic certitude that those who grow rich with neither sweat nor toil will find themselves tripped up by the earth they tread so proudly upon. For Kallars and those of other castes struggling with the material environment of the region, such faiths serve to ‘encompass’ (Robbins 2004) the secular horizons of modern development with a divine structure of expectation and care.

To toil under such circumstances, I learned from my interlocutors in the Cumbum Valley, is to work with the conviction that God will eventually reward your suffering, even when a crop, cloud, market, or employer fail to do so. ‘God will dole out our measure’, poorer men and women in particular often said to me, invoking the wage, gift, or loan that would enable them to eat and to feed their families on a difficult day. This ‘measure’ or *patti* at stake in the saying is a standard tin vessel with which grains, pulses and other foodstuffs are poured out for use and exchange in grocery stores, domestic kitchens, and harvested fields. ‘God has doled out our measure’ is something that may be said with gratitude and relief when a team of hunters bring down an animal in the forest, when an idle man or woman is offered a day’s work, when laborers are paid for long-completed tasks, or when the destitute and infirm are granted the gift of a meal. The saying expresses a hope and even faith that all beings in need may rely on the



benevolence of caring deities. Although the expression is suited for many circumstances, it also echoes more specifically the use of the *pati* as a means of repaying agrarian labor.

Although most agricultural labor in the Cumbum Valley is repaid with a cash wage, many forms of work are compensated in kind with the aid of a tin measuring *pati*: one *pati* of peanuts along with a cash wage to peanut field harvesters, several *pati* of unhusked rice for each acre of harvested paddy, and more of the same to the men charged with guarding and watering ripening rice fields.<sup>28</sup> To ask the gods to dole out a measure is to invoke a longstanding image of the cultivator as a giver of livelihood to others. At the same time, however, the saying proposes that behind the generosity of the farmer lies a gift of God – to recast deities themselves in the image of cultivators. What is most striking about this formulation in light of development is its construal of divine figures as the ultimate trustees of terrestrial well-being, even when the imagined instrument of their care is a quotidian artifact of the agrarian economy.

Karupayi *amma* for example, was an elderly Kallar woman who had worked as a tenant cultivator and a daily wage laborer for decades on the agrarian terrain of Kullappa Gounden Patti village, lands once set aside for the Kallar Voluntary Settlement. She found in agrarian cultivation on this terrain an ethical practice of care directed toward dependent beings, but one that began with the attentions of the deities she revered herself:

‘Parvati, Paramasivan, dole out a measure for my four children’ I say, waking up at dawn to pray. You may ask what it is to dole out a measure to the ants and however many thousands [of others]. How does [God] dole out for that many people? When we think of him, what happens to us? They [cultivators] call us for work. In the late afternoon after we work, they give us money. We take that, buy food, make rice for our children, eat . . . We scatter rice for the chickens and chicks – the stones and broken rice that are there too. The chicken eats that and leaves it and goes. At once, what does it do, the ant? What is left down there, the broken rice, the ant gathers it and keeps it in its nest. What we put out, the chicken eats it, and the ant gathers it, and a crow pecks at what remains: at those one or two remaining grains, running and coming, jabbing at what is left. Then how does God dole out a measure? We threw that broken rice for the chickens. That chicken ate, this crow ate, and what remains the ant also took.

Karupayi *amma* sketched this great chain of giving as a means of resolving a particular problem, how did God manage to look after the infinite number of living beings? Her vivid narrative made clear that this end was achieved through the incidental deeds of these beings themselves; the farmer here was no more than one link in a vast network of heedless and accidental gifts to others. I pointed out that farmers doled out *pati* measures of their own on the threshing ground. But Karupayi *amma* saw nothing surprising in this particular resemblance. ‘Only if God doles out a measure will a heap of grain come here!’ she insisted: the good graces of a divine figure ripened the crop in the first place.

Well before each harvest was to be divided among cultivators and workers, the crop itself would have to have ripened as a measure doled out by God. This was indeed a vision of a ‘moral economy’ (Scott, 1976; Thompson, 1991), but one in which the right



to a precarious subsistence was underwritten by divine favor rather than by the largesse of the wealthy or the goodwill of the state. The moral economy of the godly gift places divine accident, luck and fate at the heart of agrarian production. The fruits of agrarian labor in this imagination are subject to forces far beyond the toil of individual cultivators. These forces serve as spurs and warnings to cultivators to work on the land with moral conviction, and with the hope that such care will one day be rewarded. They entrust the very possibility of progressive growth to the care of divine beings beyond the domain of a national developmental state or its local representatives. They suggest that the moral underpinnings of development in India cannot be reduced to the secular legacies of a modern governmental apparatus. The modernity of development here remains indebted to the workings of a rival moral economy of intervention and uplift.

## CONCLUSIONS

In India as elsewhere, the optimism with which state agencies and international institutions pursued development in the postwar era has long since proven naïve. But what I have sought to show here is that ordinary rural subjects of development react to its endless disappointments not by questioning the desirability of progress itself, but rather by holding more closely to this prospect as an aim of life. Individuals may find their prospects entrusted to the moral expectations of various kinds of agencies: state officials, parents and other respected kin, friends, teachers, labor bosses, community and party leaders, revered deities, even the moral judgment of the earth upon which one may toil, or the insistent reminders of one's own ripening heart or conscience. In the face of such varied expectations, underdevelopment is best understood as an ongoing state of post-colonial being, rather than as an initial point of departure to be displaced by a clear point of arrival. It is for this reason that moral languages and practices of virtue provide such essential resources to development's subjects. Moral traditions and moralizing interventions support 'arguments' (MacIntyre, 1984) with the nature of the present: they compose the field of struggle in which contemporary life assumes its particular forms. Their call may be clear and overpowering in certain circumstances, while inaudible and indistinct in others. And yet, when such imperatives are turned into the terrain of the self as ethical guides to feeling, thought, and action, they can provide a way of navigating the difficult impasses of the present. They may even yield the glimpse of a distant justice.

Agrarian citizens of the Cumbum Valley continue to debate whether Kallar households in the region have advanced themselves by means of diligent toil or through the pursuit of other, more 'crooked' paths to wealth such as liquor distillation, usury, and smuggling. The terms of this contrast, however, are themselves overstated. Cultivable land may be wrested from others here by means of violence or deceit, or bought by reinvesting the returns of illicit yet more lucrative trades. Returns from the cultivation and sale of agricultural lands may be used in turn to finance clandestine occupations, or even to disguise the profits earned in such enterprises. Economic pursuits in the Cumbum Valley today are rife with such exchanges, compulsions, and compromises. From the vantage point of such complex engagements, to imagine agriculture simply as a moralizing activity may appear naïve at best. Yet at the same time, it is clear that moral development stands as a powerful expectation that its rural subjects impose upon themselves and upon those entities that have long promised it to them, a durable idiom of

critique. Agricultural work provides for many who practice it a fertile field of moral prospects, signs and promises. If we are to come to terms with what development means to those who have long been expected to reach it and live it, we must learn to acknowledge imaginations such as these.

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### Notes

- 1 'There are two meanings of the word *subject*,' writes Foucault (1982: 212), 'subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge'. Although Gupta (1998: 39) observes that development discourse makes people subjects in both of these senses, his exploration of this theme is confined to a discussion of agrarian populism and its popular articulations. I engage more closely here with the ways in which people in India struggle to develop what they understand as the nature of their own selves, in relation to the developmentalism of the state and other agencies.
- 2 The Piramalai Kallars are one of its most important endogamous subcastes of the Kallar caste, a community of several million individuals dispersed throughout southern Tamil Nadu. On various Kallar populations of south India, see Dumont (1986), Dirks (1993) and Blackburn (1978).
- 3 Ayyar to IGP, 13 January 1921, G.O. No. 447 Home (Judicial), 1 March 1921, Tamil Nadu State Archives, Chennai, India (hereafter TNSA).
- 4 Laziness had, of course, long been understood as a characteristic tendency of all Indians: 'Phlegmatic indolence pervades the nation', James Mill (1997: 333) observed, for example (my thanks to Vinay Gidwani for this reference). But this was deemed especially true of the so-called criminal classes, whose predatory deeds were easily diagnosed as symptoms of reckless ease.
- 5 'Out of the economics of Eden had come an ideology of development which was fundamental to the making of the British Empire', Drayton (2000: 59) writes.
- 6 I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for reminding me of the third of these points.
- 7 Note by Cardew, 7 August 1910, G.O. No. 2683 Revenue, 15 August 1910, TNSA.
- 8 Stuart to Paddison, 16 June 1915, G.O. No. 1649 Judicial, 27 June 1916, TNSA.
- 9 Clinch, 'Memorandum', G.O. No. 1649 Judicial, 27 June 1916, TNSA.
- 10 E.A. Harvey, 3 June 1917, Home (Judicial) G.O. No. 1725, 18 August 1917, TNSA.
- 11 *Note Showing the Progress Made in the Settlement of Criminal Tribes in the Madras Presidency up to September 1916* (pp. 4–5 and p. 18).

- 12 Officials confronting a wartime environment of scarcity and financial austerity were reluctant at the time to sanction a *compulsory* settlement for Kallars: this approach was viewed as a costly experiment with unpredictable consequences and questionable urgency. A voluntary settlement won official approval instead.
- 13 American Madura Mission Records, United Theological College Archives, Bangalore, India. See also Jean and John Comaroff (1991) for similar discourses in southern Africa.
- 14 E.P. and G.S. Holton to Friends, 16 May 1904, ABC 16.1.9, v17, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA (hereafter HLH).
- 15 J.P. Jones, 'A Great Opportunity', 29 October 1914, ABC 16.1.9, v.21, HLH.
- 16 See, for example, E.P. and G.S. Holton to Friends, 27 November 1906, ABC 16.1.9, v17, and E.P. Holton to Friends, 23 April 1918, ABC 16.1.9, v22, HLH.
- 17 Bushnell emphasized that this process held no guarantees, 'The growth of Christian virtue is no vegetable process, no mere onward development', he wrote, identifying the need to struggle actively with evil. Nevertheless, he argued, parents could rely on the 'organic power of character' passing from God to their children in order to develop virtuous conduct as an unconscious 'habit of life' (Bushnell, 2001). In an intellectual climate of liberal and progressive theology, many workers of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions were drawn to this vision of a gradually developed Christian ethos (Blaufuss, 2003). Liberal theologians hoped to bring people and societies to Christ 'by environmental influences and a kind of spiritual osmosis', observed Hutchison (1987: 103).
- 18 E.P. and G.S. Holton to Friends, 29 May 1905, ABC 16.1.9, v17, HLH.
- 19 E.P. Holton to W.E. Strong, 30 June 1917, ABC 16.1.9, v22, HLH.
- 20 E.P. Holton to Friends, 23 April 1918, ABC 16.1.9, v22, HLH.
- 21 E.P. Holton to Friends, 21 October 1918, and E.P. Holton to W.E. Strong, 6 July 1918, ABC 16.1.9, v22, HLH.
- 22 Holton to Madura DM, 11 April 1918, G.O. No. 1585 Home (Judicial), 6 July 1918, TNSA.
- 23 Short note on the Kallar Settlement, G.O. No. 2092 Home (Judicial), 12 Sept. 1918, TNSA.
- 24 Letter from E.P. Holton to W.E. Strong, 30 June 1917, ABC 16.1.9, v22, HLH.
- 25 Rajamanikkam to SG PA, 11 February 1918, G.O. No. 1893 Home (Judicial), 24 August 1918, and DSC Coimbatore to SC Madras, 9 September 1919, G.O. No. 2329 Home (Judicial), 18 September 1920, TNSA.
- 26 See Pandian (forthcoming) for a discussion of the category of the 'agrarian citizen' or *kutiyaanavan* as a means of both social and moral distinction in the southern Tamil countryside of south India.
- 27 For a close examination of the relationship between agrarian and industrial toil in the Kongunad region of the Tamil country in south India, see Chari (2004). Chari describes toil in the industrial workplace as an indexical sign, pointing toward older histories of agrarian labor. My argument here is that toil has not always served as such a sign of secular work in the Tamil country, and that therefore we must attend to displacements and overlappings of meaning.
- 28 Dharma Kumar (1992) records the use of *patiyal* – literally, a person of, with, or for *pati* – as a common name for 'hired farm servant[s] receiving wages in kind' in the

19th-century countryside around Madras. I found no evidence, however, that this particular term was used in the Cumbum Valley where I conducted my research.

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