

**THE UNIVERSITY OF HULL**

**[TRIBES, POLITICS AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN INDIA: A CASE  
STUDY OF THE MULLUKURUMBAS OF THE NILGIRI HILLS]**

**being the Thesis submitted for the Degree of**

**Doctor of Philosophy**

**in the University of Hull**

**by**

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**Summary of the Thesis submitted for a Ph.D Degree**

**by**

**Sudarshan Sathianathan**

**on**

**[TRIBES, POLITICS AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN INDIA: A CASE  
STUDY OF THE MULLUKURUMBAS OF NILGIRI HILLS]**

Mainstream studies on Indian politics have delineated the people of India into two categories, variously described as the rich and the poor, the elite and the masses, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, among others. This has resulted in the emergence of a common theme which suggests that a powerful dominant minority have been able to use the forces of social change to subject the masses to a position of weakness. Nowhere else is this more obvious than in studies analysing the politics of tribal people in India, which goes further to suggest that except for a few groups, the rest are politically naive and placid.

This study takes issue with such a view by describing the political behaviour of the Mullukurumbas: a tribal group in Nilgiris, South India numbering around 1300. In spite of their low numbers and cumulative wealth - which places them squarely within the category of the so-called exploited - the Mullukurumbas reveal by their actions that they are not social dummies but actors. Analysis of their behaviour shows that they, by discernment of the socio-political contexts and through evaluation and reflection of their relative standing with others, find methods to manoeuvre social change in a direction preferable to them.

This study also highlights the following: the fact that mainstream studies on Indian politics has focused attention almost entirely on the terrain of high politics. It sees in it a discrepancy that leads to the emergence of a view, which varying in degrees suggest, an active and powerful strong placing under their domination a subjected and powerless weak. This study stretches the parameters of analysis further into the terrain of low politics where much of the transactions of the weak with the state, society and the strong take place. It shows how valued means of politics - land, money and identity - universally accepted within the context of the political culture in Nilgiris is acquired and conserved by the Mullukurumbas.

This study moves beyond the mainstream theorists in describing the politics of tribal people in India today by showing how the actions of the weak are (1) sustained in subtle and well calculated ways in the terrain of low politics and (b) is institutionalised within so called non-political structures such as family and religion. This, in spite of the pressures of change, set in motion (1) by the underlying conflict between the state and society and (2) by the settling in of the strong in niches that emerge in the power structure. By doing so, this study sheds light on the active role of the tribal people, conventionally presented merely as the weak.

## CHAPTER I

### AN OUTLINE OF THE STUDY, ITS OBJECTIVES AND A FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS.

#### Introduction

This chapter introduces the reader to the following. (1) The objectives of this study; (2) The terms used in this study, of which some are unique while others, borrowed. Those borrowed are modified to take on specific meanings. By being introduced to them here, the reader would find it not only useful, but also find the thesis more continuous in its flow. (3) The relevance of this study to the body of literature on tribal people in India. This study aims to not only look at tribal people as active participants in the Indian polity but also highlight the failure of mainstream tribal studies to see from these perspectives.

In order to do so, this study creates a framework to analyze the activities of tribal people, as well as weak groups in the Indian polity. This involves the study of the two terrains of politics in India; the high and the low. A case is made for the need to take more seriously the terrain of low politics, for it is here that the actions of the weak are more evident than in the terrain of high politics. The intended direction of this study is elaborated next with an introduction of the protagonists of this study. The premises on which this study is based, follows.

The political culture of Nilgiris, the district where this study was carried out, is introduced. It is seen as a 'game' with rules that determine the prize, as

well as valued means of politics. Three valued means are chosen in this study for analysis; land, money and identity. Next, the plan of this dissertation is laid out. This appears after a discussion involving the pros and cons of the middle - range analysis used in this study. Also, justification for the descriptive nature of this study with regard to the protagonists appears here. Finally, (9) the presentation of field work and methods of data collection. This chapter is therefore intended to be not only an introduction, but also as a reference for the study as a whole, especially with regard to the concepts used.

#### **Objective of the study.**

The objective of this research is to describe the Mullukurumbas, a tribal group in Nilgiris, South India, who number around 1300,<sup>1</sup> as actors, whose political behaviour, as well as stratagems, arise from a unique sense of identity. The identity in question here is an 'identity of the weak', which for the Mullukurumbas, is both a state of mind as well as a condition of contemporary political power sharing in Nilgiris. In other words, it is both a construction, as well as a given, providing a view for both acting and being acted upon. This study does not merely aim to show how the Mullukurumbas' self-perception of 'weak' is something they are trying to combat through collective political action. Instead, it aims to show how they perceive this 'identity of the weak' as an incentive to political action and more, how they use it.

The choice of Mullukurumbas, in this study, as actors representing the weak, is significant because they represent vividly, by their activities, how weak groups within the Indian polity, can and do transact values with other groups and

power holders in society, as well as the state. In that sense, this research does not aim to look at the Mullukurumbas as anthropological specimens and hence their 'Mullukurumbaness,' but how the autonomous political action of the Mullukurumbas, both as individuals as well as, as a group, manifests in the terrain of politics - both high and low. Hence, this study looks at Mullukurumbas as a weak political group, rather than merely as a socio-cultural group. Other writings have concentrated their attention on the physical, cultural and social characteristics of the Mullukurumbas. This study therefore skips such details, except those which are relevant to explain the political behaviour and identity of the Mullukurumbas, within the larger context of the Nilgiris society.

The objective of this study therefore indicates how the political actions of the Mullukurumbas reveal far more than 'survival strategies'<sup>2</sup> where the term encompasses responses to structurally engendered conditions of deprivation. In other words, attempting to describe far more than mere survival, this study aims to show, how the Mullukurumbas effectively determine, as much as are being determined, their place, in the social transformation under way in Nilgiris, in the terrains of high and low politics.

For a deeper analysis of the weak as actors, the terrain of politics is divided into two. They are the terrains of high and low politics. It can be observed, as one progresses through this study, that the terrain of high politics within which the weak interact provides far less returns compared to the terrain of low politics. The overwhelming strength of the strong, in the terrain of high politics, forces the weak to use the terrain of low politics as an alternative access to the acquisition of their needs and interests. Politics can also be seen

as being transcendental and transactional in the above two terrains, respectively, though one should note that high politics is not solely transcendental.

The most obvious terrain of high politics is the terrain where democratic and constitutional methods of interest articulation and aggregation takes place. Nevertheless, in Nilgiris, the capacity of this terrain to fulfil the needs of all the participants is limited. The limitations are due to certain conditions which lead to the emergence of the strong and the weak. These in turn, create further limitations on the capacity of the terrain. Over a period of time, since Independence, transcendental issues have given way to an increasing importance being given to transactional politics. The political culture of Nilgiris dictates the choice of valued means which form the base of such a transactional politics. The valued means are land, money and identity. Transcendental issues, such as equality, are seldom grappled with, with an importance that these pressing transactional issues demand. The limitations of the terrain of high politics leads to transactional issues being determined in the terrain of low politics. Terms such as high and low politics and transcendental and transactional are used in this study solely within the meaning emerging from this explanation here.

Secondly, this study aims to show how so-called non-political institutions of family and religion are used by the Mullukurumbas as bases of low politics. That is, to show how, by an institutional mode of reinterpreting and on the basis of self-justification, the Mullukurumbas use this 'identity of the weak' for political gain. Thirdly, how, behind the poverty and exploitation that pervades the socio-economic conditions of the Mullukurumbas, lie stratagems that effectively allow them to use this 'identity of the weak', to contend with those

forces that make them weak; namely, the state, society and the strong.

Going further, examine how this institutionalised mode of political organisation of the weak, reflects overall on the democratic political process of the post-colonial state. One notices that there is an inherent process of rupture taking place between the links that bound the state and society together. This is taking place, even as there is a simultaneous widening of the gap between the developmental initiative of the state towards the weak, in theory and its outcome in practice. Finally, to project the consequences of this for the future of the Indian polity. For some, including Weiner (1989), Bardhan (1984) and Herring (1989) among others, see in the participation of the marginalised in the democratic politics of post-colonial India, a slowing down or a stalemate of the political system in generating economic and social change.

As mentioned earlier, this study approaches these objectives by looking at the Mullukurumbas as a weak political group and power sharing on the basis of it. That is, it is a study of Mullukurumbas as a social group whose political behaviour and stratagem is embedded in the identity of weakness. What is crucial at this point is to state that the terms 'Mullukurumbas' and 'weak', are, at times, used interchangeably. This is because, under the specific circumstances of power sharing in Nilgiris, the social identity of Mullukurumbas and their political identity of the weak, coalesce. For example, the Mullukurumbas are forced to conform to an identity of the weak by two of the many rules of local politics in Nilgiris, namely wealth and numbers.

Seen from this perspective, one hopes this study will open the possibility of analyzing the nature of social change involving weak groups, within the

context of democratic politics of the post-independence state in India. This study however, specifically looks at three crucial valued means of power in Nilgiris, namely land, money and identity and how the Mullukurumbas placed in a position of adversity, acquire and conserve the same. Within the confines of the political culture of Nilgiris, politics, as it turns out in practice, is a struggle among groups for acquiring and conserving these valued means of power. One needs to recognise the deep rooted connection of politics to these valued means. Politics and the accessibility and scope available for both the weak and the strong becomes dependent on a difference of means arising from different sets of conditions.

In a wider sense, the growth of a state directed economy has arguably resulted in the decline of the society's control over its traditionally held power. In other words, the altering of the status quo that existed prior to independence, has been the source underlying majority of changes affecting the Mullukurumbas. Also, large scale migration of groups into Nilgiris, more so since independence, has altered the region beyond recognition. Cumulatively, these factors have set rolling new rules of power sharing, both statutory and customary, which determine the socio-political conditions of the residual groups. Here, residual groups refer to the tribal people of Nilgiris who have been the original inhabitants of the region.

Pressure, from these newly immigrant groups in particular and the overall forces of change, has resulted in the Mullukurumbas breaking up into three visible parts, which in this study are referred to as MK1, MK2 and MK3 (discussed later in the thesis). It has, above all else, made the Mullukurumbas



realise that democratic politics in Nilgiris within a post-independent polity, has gone beyond mere choice of representatives for various legislative bodies. Politics and change is now seen as directly affecting their individual and group life. Perceiving such circumscribing norms, but, not going under it, they now use it, to struggle for determining ones place in the social transformation that is taking place around them.

The Mullukurumbas realise that there is an important connection underlying power sharing and social identity. Moreover, the Mullukurumbas see in their traditions, customs and way of life, a base to maintain cohesiveness as a political group. They see this as the only effective way out towards working a stratagem so as to rearrange rapidly shifting order in ones favour. It is only in that specific political sense that the social group and social transformation acquires a rationale in this dissertation.

Within this context, this study attempts to describe the creative efforts of the Mullukurumbas, to use institutions that provide social identity of their group, so as to derive political mileage from this 'identity of the weak'. That is, creating room within the group, in order to manoeuvre externally. In other words, to internally reorganise, even as they externally adjust to the forces that subject them to the constraints of relative weakness, in an emerging contemporary social order.

#### **Terminology used in this thesis.**

It becomes imperative at this stage, to make a mention about the terminology used in this thesis. Identity in this thesis is used in the contexts of

(a) identity of weakness (b) identity of tribe (c) identity as a valued means, in the politics of Nilgiris. With regard to the identity of weakness, it is for the Mullukurumbas, both a state of mind as well as a condition of contemporary political power sharing in Nilgiris. In other words, it is both a construction as well as a given, providing a view for both acting and being acted upon. Identity of the weak and the identity of weakness when used in this thesis, refer to this context and meaning.

With regard to the identity of the tribe, it refers to the varied notions within which tribal people are described as well as defined in Indian society today. An overview of such notions are described elsewhere in this thesis. The Mullukurumbas are a tribe from the state's point of view and in tangible terms this identity provides for privileges through 'positive discrimination'.

Apart from these two contexts, identity is also used as a valued means in local politics. It is prized as much as land and money. Identity is closely aligned to the process of hinduisation and westernisation. Identity, in this sense, is a scaling mechanism that positions each group in a hierarchy, vis a vis one another in society. To attain a socially respectable identity is a deliberate endeavour of all groups in Nilgiris, thus requiring economic, religious, social as well as political resources. Hence seen from a perspective of valued means, identity as an acquisition, conservation and increase has its fall out in being accepted as a prize of low politics.

Terms like the strong, the weak, high and low politics, among others are used in a specific sense, having a meaning unique to this study. All these terms however fit themselves, one with the other, on the basis of certain ground rules

which determine power sharing in Nilgiris. Also, notably, Nilgiris in this study refers to the district and not the region.

**The relevance of this study to the body of literature on Tribal people in India.**

Going further, this study wishes to address a fundamental distortion that separates tribal people in India from others, but which is not specific to them alone. It occurs between any two groups of people who hold on to different doctrinal establishments and work on the basis of different dogmas as it were. Holding on to one by a group and considering it as sacrosanct makes the other group not different, but, superior or inferior. In other words, distortion is not viewed horizontally but from a vertical perspective. To view the actions of the four protagonists - the state, society, the strong and the weak from their own perspectives, is as much a study of judgements as analysis, if not more. The internal data when expressed outwardly by the protagonists is prone to be misunderstood by the other three and hence misinterpreted. Therefore, the alternative taken in this study was to allow expression for all value judgements to come across and yet attempt to analyze from a perspective detached from all four of the above.

This distortion, if one can call it that, was something that was ever present and ever visible during the field work. It ranged across mundane conversations and observations to profound and abstract concepts that was the crux of their interactions. Apart from the above objective, one other, is to reveal this distortion as something which ought to be recognised as a genuine dilemma unaddressed by studies on Indian tribal people today. If there is one dominant

subjective perspective commonly observable, it is seeing the weak as a non-entity. This study aims to make the weak be seen as weak and not as a non-entity. By seeing them as such, highlight the consequences of the activities of the weak for the Indian polity. Appropriately, the entry point in this thesis is through the weak. By doing so, it is hoped that the hitherto largely ignored weak who relentlessly pursue a function in the polity, making an impact on the same, will be taken as seriously as the other protagonists, the state, society and the strong.

The framework of thought within which the Mullukurumbas rationalise what is acceptable or rejectable around them, makes some of their practices strange and at times difficult to understand or accept. Yet, such practices are not done away with. It is not hard to see that Mullukurumbas and 'others' are rationalising from the basis of two different dogmas or doctrines and therefore the response to it, becomes different. Here, by dogma, one means the conceptualisation of the primal on the basis of a rationally accepted belief.

One example to substantiate this phenomenon, is as follows. When this researcher remarked that the mountains around the Mullukurumba villages were so beautiful that, in the cities, people have posters of these mountains stuck on their walls, one Mullukurumba wondered whether people in the cities lived in houses bigger than mountains ! The point one wishes to make here is, issues seen from the perspective of each of the protagonists of this thesis are so different that it is more than merely a problem of understanding each other. In this study, the word protagonist is used to describe the state, society, strong and the weak. It is another word for 'actor.' It not only refers to it but goes deeper into the

realm of their interpretation each other as actors, in different terms. Stretching this concept further, often, one noticed the other protagonists, namely the state, society and the strong looking at the Mullukurumbas, as tribal people and by such a connotation, a group different in so many respects that at certain points they are not even normal human actors. This study aims to address this distortion, by projecting the Mullukurumbas as actors, who deny and say no to others and what they see by their own right as unwanted.

This study sees the actors as they are, from their contradictory perspectives and what they see of the others. Yet, it continues with the mainstream trend of Indian political studies, keeping the state as the centre of Indian society and politics. It is hoped that by doing so, one can maintain a meaningful dialogue with other relevant literature and viable paradigm could evolve from the study.

This phenomenon is an obstacle that haunts many studies of tribal people in India so far. There is a fundamental problem otherwise, for what is given and what the strong and the weak want to take, are two entirely different things. Very often the weak, as in this case the Mullukurumbas, end up not only being denied what they want to take, but also realising, that others do not want to take what they really want to give. The struggle to relate ultimately centres on forcing the Mullukurumbas to be, something other than themselves. Studies then lead to either exploitation or civilising of tribal people as their final theme or stand point. Without denying its absence, what this study desires to point out is that behind this apparent domination the Mullukurumbas, like other tribal people, are reluctantly, deliberately refusing to comply and what is more, manipulating.

By doing so, they are constantly conforming their active role largely denied by other studies.

For Scott, 'every subordinate group creates out of its ordeal, a hidden transcript that represents a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant.'<sup>3</sup> This 'speaking behind the back of the dominant' has not been analyzed in depth in contemporary tribal studies in India. This study goes further to state that this activity of the tribal people, in the political sense of power sharing, has a lasting effect on change and thereby influence on the larger polity though it is largely ignored or considered more often as absent. Why this is not perceived as such is perhaps due to the eye catching and effective hold of power by the strong, which draws out the attention of most of the social scientists looking at tribal people in present day India. But behind this facade, it ought to become obvious that the picture merely carries a contrived imagery, effectively made to look real by the apparent willingness, acted out by the weak.

It is this particular facet of the weak which this researcher wishes to bring to the fore and this can only be done by using the universally agreed valued means - land, labour and identity. Having fixed that, other conceptual ideas, plans, programmes and democratic rituals like elections, though meaning different things for the weak and the strong, can be fitted into the overall prize of politics in Nilgiris. Seen in these terms, politics for the strong and the weak simply becomes personalisation of power through the acquiring of valued means.

The term 'weak' in this study aims to project the view that (1) it is a relative term and (2) the strong centred view of tribal studies does not give a balanced description of the politics of tribal people in India. Also, (3) the weak

in Indian politics organise their response in institutionalised terms. Finally, (4) their response though sporadic, as seen from the perspective of the subaltern theorists and hence taken to mean, not sustainable resulting in low gains is observable in the terrain of low politics as a sustained endeavour providing substantial gains to the weak. This study pursues this line of thinking further, to see how the weak pushed out of the wealth creating boundary of high politics nibble at it, attempting to damage the system that creates wealth.

#### **Perspective followed in this study.**

At this point, one needs to stress that this study is not aimed to focus purely on the problem of social transformation. It aims to see social change within the larger parameter of democratic politics in post-colonial India. This study takes the view that the Mullukurumbas - described as weak above - do not live in isolation or merely subject to external influences. It views them as responsive, reacting to these external influences and leaving an impact on them. These external influences are classified into three categories, personified as protagonists in this study, in the form of the state, society and the strong, each attempting to create a counteractive order.

For S.K. Mitra,

The post-colonial state . . . its agenda of development and nation-building involved the destruction of the customary rights and parochial ways of part of the society.<sup>4</sup>

Rajni Kothari (1970, 1990) Morris-Jones (1964), Rudolph and Rudolph (1987), Frankel (1978), Manor (1983) and Saberwal (1986) among others, have

written about this interaction between state and society. The counter-active order described here is seen as an outcome not merely due to the interaction of the state and society, as described above, but also, of another protagonist the strong. The strong are seen here as independent of the state and society, as important actors who impart their own inputs into the emerging social and political order.

The state, the society and the strong cumulatively aim to reinforce a new way of life among the Mullukurumbas as well as negatively reinforcing an old way of life. Taken singly, among other goals, the aim of the society is to enforce hierarchical submission, the strong, generation of vested interests and the state, imposition of its own values through reforms, programmes, votes. In other words what we have is social transformation that derives its impetus from a four pronged conflict which includes the state, society, the strong and the reactive efforts of the weak themselves. However, all the protagonists have their own structural and functional weaknesses and handicaps that leaves scope for manoeuvre, at the expense of the other, for all including the weak.

### **The scenario of high politics.**

The state, in this study, is seen as acting in spite of a 'pathological paradox' phenomena. One means by that, a proneness to being hijacked by the strong. This is because the post-colonial state in India is, in spite of, 'all its (so-called) institutional separation and operational autonomy . . . is related to the wider society.'<sup>5</sup> That is, the independent ability of the state to push through with its policies is continually being thwarted by the strong in society, partly



because of a reaction to the neo-colonialist perspective of the state.

The society on its part is emerging out of an 'identity' warp thrust upon it during the colonial period. In that sense, it finds in the post-colonial state, an adversary, personified as such by its institutions, as well as ideology. The strong, including the regional elites and their external counterparts are influenced by a configuration of resources and rules that lie outside, in the political arenas of the state and nation. The state - society conflict in Nilgiris leads to constant redrawing of boundaries which provides the strong opportunities to settle in those niches created. Commercial and constituency politics are therefore controlled by the strong who are able to span across regions, rooting their supports with the help of the structures of the state and conscripted elites from local region. The weak are pushed out of the terrain of high politics. The weak - the Mullukurumbas - are the disadvantaged elements who are relentlessly pushed out of the arena of high politics in Nilgiris. The important point to note is that all the above protagonists have their 'hands' tied up as it were. This, briefly, is the scenario of high politics.

### **The scenario of low politics**

At the level of low politics, however a different picture emerges. The adversarial posture assumed by the post-colonial state in high politics is effectively defused in this terrain. This is because the porous authority at its limits is taken over by elements in society. The strong, who are at the forefront of this 'take-over,' project an appearance as if, it is not they - the strong - but, the society which sets the norms in this terrain. In real terms, the strong are

instrumental in rupturing the links between the state and society and further, eliminating any possibility of the two coalescing independently of the strong. This provides, above all else, relatively far greater freedom for the weak and room to manoeuvre. Their relatively greater accessibility to share power in this terrain, becomes visible. The Mullukurumbas use it, not aiming to overthrow the state but merely stake their claim for a space, where they can acquire and hold on to valued means of power sharing in Nilgiris. In describing this power sharing, one is discussing political relationships concerned with the distribution of resources and power. For F.G. Bailey,

distribution includes not only those situations in which men co-operate with one another to achieve control. . . but also a wider field in which people. . . compete against one another for the control of resources.<sup>6</sup>

Low politics therefore provides the terrain for the weak to work out a give and take with the strong, compromise with society and thereby use vital resources which the state has control of, through power sharing born of competition and co-operation.

The protagonists; the state, society, and the strong as seen by the weak Mullukurumba in their conflict are actually a conglomeration of multi-layered elites representing the state and society. For S.K. Mitra,

local elites are a crucial hinge group whose ability to incorporate newly emerging social forces into the political arena and to ease out old style notables is the critical determinant of the stability, legitimacy and expansion of the state.<sup>7</sup>

In Nilgiris, this hinge group is multi-layered. In the upper echelon are found elites who are settled in the structures of the state and in the lower ranks are found those who root themselves in the local society. These multi-layered

elites interact with the weak in multifarious ways, at times blurring their intentions as to who they actually represent. This is because of the hinge nature of their linkage to one another. However, most often the state and society can be perceived by the weak, as powerful and visible symbols, clearly standing apart and extraneous to the strong. The multi-layered elite are seen as having the advantage of choosing the chair of power which they wish to occupy, give a name and personalise it. Actually, one of the privileges of being an elite is, when seen in their role in low politics, a difficulty in focusing reaction against them, because of a convenient blurring of the three categories of the state, society and the strong.

What happens as a result is a certain amount of confusion regarding practice of social codes of political conduct. One need not go very far to notice a political culture of 'amoralism'<sup>8</sup> that fill these indistinct amorphous arrangements. This, instead of confusing the focus of reaction, allows the weak to squeeze themselves into a moral niche where one cannot question another's behaviour, since the strong are in the same amorphous medley like situation. In terms of political behaviour, a kind of mutual fear of what one has, denies the ability to speak about who one is. This forces politics to be seen as a struggle for certain valued means that are transactional rather than transcendental in nature. In the case of Nilgiris, this transactional politics is seen as a give and take between different groups that expends all their attention.

Transcendental issues are taken out of the discourse of this low, mundane, everyday politics. For Atul Kohli, this phenomenon is to be expected. He sees it happening as a result of change engineered from a 'state reformist scope within

a democratic capitalist mode of development.<sup>9</sup> For him, the failure of politics to be transcendental in nature, for example, focusing attention on pressing issues such as poverty is the result of 'an alliance of domination between weakly organised nationalist political elite and the commercially oriented propertied groups.'<sup>10</sup>

In Nilgiris, this results in politics almost wholly confined to transactional considerations and an over riding neglect of the transcendental. Going further, apart from creating a profusion of transient power holders at the local level, the transactional nature of politics, with relevance to the Mullukurumbas, allows them to derive substantial returns at the level of 'low politics'. More importantly, it creates a dilemma for the state; whether to support the weak and stall the growth of the strong or, to stand back and take the blame for their poverty. The absence of a dialogue between the weak and the state as a result of the wedged-in strong further redirects politics from its transcendental motive and purpose.

In the process, the weak appear clumped on the periphery of a local regional economy. Low politics is the only alternative avenue available to the weak to redress the balance. It takes place, not through passionate protest movements nor by spontaneous forms of resistance, but a repertoire that is based on selective use of traditional and modern tools of bargaining and manoeuvre used within an institutionalised framework. Here, repertoire refers to the weak not confining themselves to one form of action but using more than one mode, depending on its availability and thus drawing from it, the maximum political mileage possible.

This sometimes appears contradictory and unsuitable to the outcome desired. On the other hand, the possibility of failure which looms large on the horizon compels them to use this repertoire than depend on a single mode or avenue. This includes 'hidden transcripts to acquire land, labour, loyalty and identity. For Scott, hidden transcripts refers to the 'discourse that takes place 'offstage' beyond direct observation by power holders.<sup>11</sup> The repertoire of the weak is not a game like snakes and ladders where a patternless random seems present, but, a game where rules exist that is mutually discernable for all including the weak and the strong.

#### **The parameters of low politics and its justification by the weak.**

High politics in this study, refers to the commercial and constituency politics that deviates from its transcendental concerns. It involves investments, loss and profit, selling and exchange of power yet confines participants to a exclusively conscripted network of both individuals and groups. Low politics on the other hand involves transactions within a more disencumbered game of power sharing. This game

should not be seen as consisting just of the competition to acquire values . . . but also involves strategic attempts to attach meanings to the relationships within which it takes place.<sup>12</sup>

The relationships seen here is always in the form of the 'weak and the strong'. It involves, what may at times be considered, as apolitical activities far removed from the pale of overtly recognisable politics. It may involve, for example, spirit possession, which one scholar correctly represents, as 'a structured and in some cases a highly formalised phenomenon, which can be

culture creating and enrich the consciousness of the individual and the group.'<sup>13</sup> Going beyond it, this phenomenon also highlights a structured reality. It reflects the expressive condition of the relationship between the weak and the strong that is structured around a sense of betrayal. This phenomenon, like many other similar to it, is formalised. It is within this structure that the formalised phenomenon as in this case, spirit possession is used to enrich the consciousness of the weak, both as individuals and as a group, in their relationship with the strong. Not all actions justify ones point of 'enrichment of group consciousness' of a weak against a strong. It merely reflects how a specific phenomenon can be perceived in two different ways. At times, this leads to a failure to see it this way, both by the weak and the strong, resulting in a sense of 'false consciousness.'

The mistaking of the weak, seeing themselves as the strong, would be in the form of low politics a loss. For example, 'Sangamam' a Movement for a pan-tribal autonomous region, under the leadership of counter-elites, analyzed in this study, is seen as creating a false consciousness of strength to the tribal people leading to their playing the role of the strong in the arena of high politics. It needs to be stressed here, that, that is one crucial reason why protest Movements of the weak fail and are not sustained. For Scott, forays into high politics is usually a 'sign of great desperation.'<sup>14</sup>

These seemingly apolitical actions such as spirit possession mentioned earlier, on the other hand, provide a consciousness to the group. It builds on an identity of weakness, born out of a sense of betrayal by the strong. It certainly justifies their reactive pursuits in the alternate terrain of low politics. In other

words, it structures reality in such a way, that the weak make a deliberate effort to pin actions to the consciousness of weakness, structure it around a sense of betrayal, and use low politics as a condition of advantage in the larger polity.

### **The contra-position of the strong and the weak.**

In this study, this researcher takes the view that the strong are something more than the elites, though not excluding them. The weak here are not the masses, though not excluding them either. These terms are 'thesis specific' and pinned down to the struggle for valued means - land, money and identity - around which power is shared and meted out by the interplay of the protagonists. The strong derive their strength from acquiring valued means and hence personalise power, while the weak cannot do it on the same terrain as the strong.

Can one be pinned down to say who the strong and the weak are ? The weak, on whom this study centres on, are the Mullukurumbas. The strong are, among others, those whom the Mullukurumbas encounter within this structured reality of power sharing. In that sense, the term 'strong' in this study can only be defined within their relationship with the Mullukurumbas. The Mullukurumbas are however against a system as they are against the strong; both being abstract quantities outside this structured reality in Nilgiris, yet real to the Mullukurumbas.

One must hasten to add that the strong and the weak are separated by moral, political, economic and societal boundaries though. The reason why it is difficult to place a finger on, for example, the local landlords, plantation owners, or local member of the legislative assembly and say these are the strong, is

because the strong and the weak are not pitted on the level of a one to one interaction. However, it is obvious that the above are not the weak. The framework of politics drawn in this study includes two other protagonists the state and the society. The strong and the weak then merge into a semi - abstraction beyond a point. For clarity sake, this study wishes to keep the weak as an intelligible entity. They are the Mullukurumbas. Attempting to theorise at a middle range level, the categorisation of the strong in this study personifies a mixture of what they visibly appear to the Mullukurumbas as well as the representations of the larger background, from which their sustenance is derived, namely the state and society.

#### **The institutionalised and innovative weak.**

Institutions like the family, tribe or religion is seen in this study as used to (1) transact and (2) provide justification, for the many actions of the weak in the terrain of low politics. Also, there is a sense of innovation in the activities of the weak. One day you will have the weak watching from the sidelines the drama of high politics and subsequently finding their way to a utilitarian niche that arises from the same. Standing in the background, not in front as a performer, always away from the action, keeping the limelight focused away from oneself. Yet, the weak are never far off from the action itself. They ride on the other protagonists without forcing any discernable discomfiture, making a gain at the others expense without visibly disturbing the apparent permanence of the status quo. Always maintaining that distance from a desperate foray into high politics, the weak, by sustained, institutionalised and innovative methods in



the terrain of low politics, generate a productive reaction.

In other words, it is more than making a quick buck out of a particular opportunity, but in reality, in a well hidden and garbled vocabulary, communicating to the other protagonists their capriciousness. The weak know the likes and dislikes of the strong and by doing that which seems politically appropriate, want the strong to know that they are in disagreement. Yet, the weak do not express disagreement openly, but in a covert way. The direction taken is by a lengthy attrition; to pull down the other protagonists including the strong. This phenomenon is something that is not well recognised in contemporary Indian politics. The reason for neglect maybe due to the lack of a determinable scale to measure the consequences of such behaviour. For one theorist - the others - those who do not manage, control or own the means of production and in many ways similar to the weak in this study,

serve, obey, or - as they own little else - sell their labour for survival and continuity, while obeying the rules of selling and buying. (In other words). . . class inequalities, can never be reversed within the framework of a stable, welfare oriented, capitalist state. They can be at best mitigated.<sup>15</sup>

The view taken in this study is that the weak have no intentions of overthrowing the state. Instead, their objectives is to aim for a place to work out an amoral politics. Thereby, wishing to effectively turn out a reactive defiance, of the very forces that make them weak in the first place, albeit in a hidden mode. Politics of the weak then, in Nilgiris, become true to the words of Atul Kohli, 'the maximum profit of the strongest in the short term. . . . the losers having alternate channels of social and economic mobility.'<sup>16</sup>.

### **The Premise of this study.**

The hypothesis of this study therefore is; the Mullukurumbas, who represent the weak, are not social dummies but actors, who are motivated exclusively by the shared norms or 'symbols and meanings' of their own culture per se. To varying degrees, in discernable social contexts, they use them to evaluate and reflect on their relative standing with others, some times questioning their cultural norms and at other times finding within it adaptive methods to manoeuvre through change. As actors, they are capable of reflective evaluation, but in doing so they do not simply consult some obscure calculus of desire, but refer to their sense of self and their relationships to others around them.

This hypothesis arises from the assumption that political consciousness in Nilgiris - under the overall framework drawn by the state and society - creates the need for competing groups, within a structured reality of the strong and the weak, to work out a particular political behaviour. Importantly, one that would give them the best possible returns in a loss gain calculation. If, in the ideal sense, everyone is everyone's equal and if the framework does not permit any deviation from this norm, there would be no need to change the status quo and every group's collective desire would only enhance the equality of all. But if one group finds itself in a circumstance that has none of the above, but a status quo unequally in some other groups favour, then the first group loses the desire to stay put. Instead, one notices as in Nilgiris, the alternate need for finding a respectable place for one's group in the hierarchy. This position that the groups occupy are not always found as right by others. What then occurs is a fight to

pull each other down from the position each group is in. Political behaviour then becomes not only calculative behaviour but also a factor of conditions, both of which is made use of to work out gain and loss in this particular social transformation. If this can be considered to be a game, then the game, one notices, has its own rules, tools and resources.

The important point to note here is that the groups higher up the social hierarchy appropriate partially the rules and also bind it. They create rules and subsequently impose an asymmetry forcing the rest not to behave as they do. This strengthens their position and also allows them to stabilise through elimination of a few from the game. Within this reality, each group realises that what each group is against, is other groups plus rules plus tools plus resources. Finally, every group provides additional strength to such a political game because each wants to be a part of it. (Each one of the above plus reinforce one another).

### **The Political Culture of Nilgiris and Identity.**

Assertion of ones group identity is socially vital in contemporary Nilgiris for all groups. Nilgiris society may be pluralist in terms of different groups one comes across, but, it is a conformist society that demands groups to have certain set identities to arrange themselves within it. Identities therefore perform the vital role of mediation in a society that is segmented into solidarities. It helps to shift tension and contextualise the same as between solidarities and not individuals. In terms of tangible benefits, for some groups and in this study the Mullukurumbas, for example, benefits from the state in the form of development programmes and jobs are a direct consequence of the use of identity. Identity

therefore is vital for groups, in order to relate to society as well as the state. Allowance is usually given to groups - as a result of social blanks - to have dual use identities that at times contradict itself. This is because of a political culture that values the need for identity more than envisaging the validity of its content.

In contemporary Nilgiris, groups that found their identity historically in their caste are seeing in the role of the state an attempt to break this down. Due to the inability of the state to have a free hand in pushing through a rational achievement based identity because of it being encrusted by the strong, what we have in Nilgiris is a network thick society. This network is an ossifying one which stultifies the attempt by the state. However, for the groups within society that find themselves unequally aligned to others, there is an inability to find an alternative identity. This is because of the lack of opportunities, which is a consequence of a strong dominated society. Subsequently, those groups unequally placed are falling prey to expressions of identity primarily based on the need to develop self-respect and a social status vis a vis other groups. It is in other words, an attempt at social differentiation. These are incomplete identities as it were, one of - tamil, hindu, dalit . . . . These are identities found in the canyons between the traditional identities they once possessed and the modern identities they are expected to imbibe, but cannot.

Identity as a value refers to the attempt to gain recognition from other groups. In Nilgiris, it means the presentation of the hinduness of one's group in the religious sense and an 'insider' in the social sense. It results in an effort to reinvent one's group identity and to find in ones past some person or value that

can be mentioned now, which would give them a sense of respect as a Hindu and yet genuinely modern with a strong depth in tradition. It involves, among other things, what the individuals and groups practice in their interaction in society.

In Nilgiris, all groups attempt to appropriate modern tools for use that are unlikely, unethical, unimaginable . . . in a western context. In reality, the groups are not becoming modern, they are only altering their traditional way of doing things in more comfortable, easier, quicker terms . . . than before. They are not changing themselves as much as realtering, readjusting, redefining, rewriting . . . in new words, but using the same language. Identity then is a construction, the value of which is derived primarily from external need rather than any deep seated internal content. Identity has to be in touch with change.

Political culture in Nilgiris involves using such an identity. This involves a mixing up of myths and legends with history, to cumulatively endorse the group's social position. Identity is a fulcrum around which most social issues rotate and are evaluated. Most importantly, in a situation where everything that is needed is scarce and the no-win framework within which weak participate makes politics in Nilgiris centred around identity as a valued mean.

#### **Land as a resource within the political culture of Nilgiris.**

In Nilgiris, the nature of political culture has a direct consequence on the way land is valued. Two major factors are visible in this front. The direct competition and alienation of erstwhile tribal lands and secondly, the ecological conditions that determine land use. The contemporary movement in India towards standardisation of land tenures has several principal consequences. Crucially,

land is seen by most groups in Nilgiris, especially the tribal people as Gregory suggests' the ultimate inalienable gift.<sup>17</sup> Land plays a fundamental part in the economic and social role of individuals as well as groups. Land as a possession is as important, as identity is valued in social transactions.

The peculiar conditions of land use in Nilgiris and its incentive use has had its impact on the politics of Nilgiris. The ecological conditions that Nilgiris offers is extremely well suited for the growth of vital foreign exchange earning commodities, such as coffee, tea and spices among other crops. The climate in this hilly region makes it south India's most popular resort for tourists, especially in summer. This has resulted in the growth of a tourist market that includes an ever increasing service sector. The impact of these two primary factors has led to greater value placed on land. Deforestation combined with extension of plantations and pressure due to population growth as a result of immigration have made land dear. Even as change takes place, land has become most of all a commodity. Possession of land in Nilgiris serves as a foothold for one's role in politics, a valued mean.

### **The political culture of Nilgiris and Money/labour.**

The economy of Nilgiris is built on two major pillars namely plantations and tourism. Plantations not only predominate in a land scarce environment but serve as centres of cheap labour in an labour surplus environment. This leads to a difficulty for most inhabitants of the region to get sustained work. In both the plantation and tourist economies indigenous groups encounter competition from wage labourers from neighbouring districts and states. This large alien work

force along with the elites who have their base in the large metropolises of south India sponge off a substantial part of the income generated in the region. Also, the nature of the plantation economy is such that it is highly dependant on national and international markets. This results in lowly payments for wage labourers. For social groups within such an environment labour and its ends money becomes important valued means.

### **The plan of this dissertation.**

As mentioned earlier, the need to see all the four protagonists as actors creates a difficulty in description. This study therefore is structured in such a way that earlier chapters do not vividly portray the picture of the Mullukurumbas in the specific sense mentioned above, as actors. However, careful attention is taken to keep away from seeing them as mere objects as in most studies of tribal people in India today. The active role of the Mullukurumbas comes to the fore in later chapters. The reason why this distortion cannot be overcome completely is because of the middle-level analysis taken in this study. One could have got around this by converting this study into a study of factions and seen it purely in terms of the role of the weak in high politics. Alternatively, one could have raised the study to a higher level or push it down to a village level. Either way, the role of the protagonists in this study would not undergo the kind of lateral stretching considered vital in this study. The dynamics of the interaction among the four protagonists would have failed to emerge, for the role of one would have had to be diminished to enhance the role of the other.

Instead of answering the now quite fundamental question posed by

Dumont, 'Is the village indeed the social fact which it has long been assumed to be?'<sup>18</sup> One can safely move beyond it and say that the village in Indian politics, though real, does not encompass all the elements of the network that would provide meaning to this study. First, the desire to see Mullukurumbas as a tribal people would help us to refrain from dissecting out certain vital components from this network, which a village level study would force us to. Secondly, by seeing these protagonists on such a canvas, as used in this study and especially the weak on whom the primary focus is, the active role of the weak would appear far more longer lasting than as a relatively ephemeral faction within a village. By holding the analysis at a middle-range level, one can also encompass low politics and thus bring in to the mainstream a much neglected terrain where power sharing takes place, apart from the commercial and constituency politics, in the relatively well analyzed terrain of high politics.

Factional politics may have much to offer a larger tribal group, say the Jats in Haryana or Uttar Pradesh, the Santhals in Bihar or for that matter, the Badagas in Nilgiris. For a small group around 1300 strong, where the pressure they can exert on behalf of themselves is too minimal, low politics has to be taken seriously. It is here that the weak carry enough credentials and reveal through their actions a solidity. In the final analysis, one view does not decry the other, it is the angle that varies. By analyzing at a middle level, as in this study, the impression on the canvas carries a scene whose analysis provides scope for a different insight. Yet, it carries its own hurdles, the most conspicuous of course being descriptive. This will become obvious as the study progresses.

This dissertation is divided into four parts. Part one is an effort in



charting out a theoretical framework. It includes sections dealing with (a) an overview of the notion of tribe (b) a theoretical discussion of different approaches that have been and are presently considered useful in drawing out a framework that would encompass the four protagonists of this study so as to provide scope to analyze state formation and politics of the weak. Apart from working out the above, it is also an effort to determine the cutting edge of current tribal studies and generate discussion of its appropriateness to contemporary politics.

Part two has three sections dealing with (a) a historical sketch of the Mullukurumbas and Nilgiris prior to the British era, during the British era ending up with post-independence and the Mullukurumbas today (b) change and its impact on Mullukurumba culture and (c) valued means and their role in the political culture of Nilgiris.

Part three deals with how those valued means are acquired, conserved and increased by the strong, vis a vis the weak. This part once again has four sections, dealing with (a) description of the four protagonists (b) the strong and the weak themselves and how the two fundamental rules of high politics - wealth and number, do not give scope for the Mullukurumbas to emerge as the strong and (c) using the example of 'Sangamam' - a movement towards pan-tribal identity based on the above rules show, how high politics is seen as an ineffective terrain by the weak with regard to valued means.

Finally, part four deals with low politics. It turns around part three and sees it from the point of view where the Mullukurumbas become the centre and how (a) using the institutions of family and religion (b) contextualising change

around them within an identity of weakness (c) they claim back valued means that they lose in high politics. (Section c, deals with cases of behaviour and actions that serve such a purpose.) The study concludes with a discussion of the effectiveness of power sharing between weak and the strong, the society and the state in Nilgiris and project the consequences of this for the future of the Indian polity.

### **Fieldwork and methods of data collection.**

The basis of field work used in this study was the employment of in-depth interviews combined with direct observation. This section explains how the field work was conducted. It involved a stay in Tamilnadu for a period of three months and in Nilgiris for around two of them. Having resided in Tamilnadu for the past 27 years and having undertook studies on tribal people in Nilgiris during the summer months of 1988 and 1989, this researcher had a certain amount of familiarity with the language and people of Nilgiris, very specially the Mullukurumbas.

Two reasons justify the choice of Mullukurumbas as a representative of the weak. As discussed earlier, the small population of Mullukurumbas combined with very low cumulative wealth as a group, along side a historical identity of being tribal and all the connotations it carries in a identity conscious society, have made the Mullukurumbas weak, in the specific sense meant in this study. Add to this the fact that like many tribal groups in post-colonial India they are found in the peripheral reaches of administration, as in Gudalur taluk in Nilgiris. This represents to a certain extent the commonly observed fact of tribal life in

India, a sense of being distanced from the leverage of power. Mullukurumbas therefore represent tribal groups, small in number, low in cumulative wealth, a very low social identity and peripheralised in terms of power, common all over India.

In-depth interviews with Mullukurumbas as well as other indigenous and non-indigenous groups in Nilgiris were conducted. They were in the form of core interviews of sixty individuals. This was supplemented by extended interviews with another fifty - four individual Mullukurumbas in 21 hamlets that lie within six different villages in Gudalur taluk, Nilgiris. In addition to these in-depth interviews on history, social transformation and their perception of bargaining of power, a further one hundred unstructured interviews with special focus on land, labour and individual political choices of using identity and loyalty was carried out. These interviews did not provide either statistical or quantitative information, for the focus of questions was to elicit information that was experiential both in the individual and group sense.

To determine information for these one hundred unstructured interviews in the six villages visited, informants were met from an expanding set of circles spread outwards from the house in which the researcher stayed. Very often, it resulted in interviewing the spouses of household heads as the latter were unavailable. Any other sampling technique would have been unsuccessful due to the limitations of mutual time available for both the Mullukurumbas and the researcher during the days spent in the respective villages.

The sample was drawn from administrative officers, the police, irrigation and forestry officials, professional people like medical doctors, school teachers

and lecturers, clergymen, bank officials, plantation managers, businessmen, panchayat and block level leaders, tribal leaders, politicians, social workers and missionaries. One commonality all of them shared was their association with the Mullukurumbas on a day to day basis and in the larger context, the Nilgiri society. To each of these persons the questions addressed were obviously different, seeking to cull out information relating to that which each one was particularly involved with and showed expertise in, within the context of the problem addressed in this study.

The extended interviews were unstructured so as to explore in depth, in a fluid, open ended conversation with key informants. One also formulated 'grand-tour questions'<sup>19</sup> and probing questions on the basis of theoretical interests or of informants responses to past inquiries. One also queried informants about the meaning of some events and issues in progress in the opportunistic mode of interviewing. The strength of these unstructured interviews was that informants had great freedom to express themselves using their own cultural constructions independently of any presupposition. In other words, its strength was its trustworthiness or validity of the information collected. However one was soon to realise that this trustworthiness was not always guaranteed: it depended on a number of factors including the motives and capabilities of the key informants and the degree of openness in the interaction.

The interviews that were conducted involved the raising of the issues to be discussed by the researcher, but, the respondents were allowed to reply in their own way. One noticed that the advantage of this approach was that, one's own concepts did not predetermine the interviewees account and they were able

to express their own views freely. The disadvantage however was the difficulty to analyze such rich, valuable material. It was also difficult to validate one-off interviews. It also required considerable skill both in obtaining information and interpreting it. One attempted to safeguard it by referring to outside judges and compared findings with other types of data to put forward other possible interpretations.

To overcome random error, bias and systematic distortion, (1) informants assessments, as far as possible, of who might be a groups significant actors was made use of (2) One accurately recorded, as far as possible, the circumstances of the collection of information, reported both the research procedures used as well social context. (3) Conclusions drawn from unstructured interviews were cross-checked with direct observation. (4) Primary information sources were also cross-checked to allow for second opinion on the interpretation of information at hand.

The concerns of the interviews were largely influenced by background material that one read prior to the field work. Nilgiris has an unusually rich body of historical and archival commentary of itself in the form of written records. One interviewed as many parties to an issue as possible and checked the plausibility of different accounts against each other, available written records, and also compared it with similar circumstances in other world areas. One realised that collecting data was not a matter of opening oneself to the straight forward information provided by others. Choice of informants, formulation of questions and one's own identity in the communities studied, all powerfully constrained the dialogue.

Participant observation was usually in the form of loosely structured, opportunistic note taking. As participant observer, one isolated the domain of political behaviour in which one was interested in and then observed as much behaviour as possible that may have something to do with the domain. Later, one tabulated these observations and assigned numerical values such as frequency of interaction and so forth.

Observations were made through both unstructured and passive participation. Unstructured observation helped one to record as much as possible using no prearranged format. The advantage was that it allowed one to observe responses to a wide range of activities. However, the disadvantage was that it resulted in an overload, since one was trying to take in too much at once. One overcame this as observations became successively more focused. With regard to passive participation, one took no part in activities, or was present anywhere, unknown to the group. This, one assumes, led to minimum disruption of the normal activities of the group. However, it was obvious that one did make the group feel uncomfortable at times.

In the final analysis, the information gathered were not intended to be numerical in content but facts embedded in the experiential domain of the individual concerned. As much as gathering the same, it was also an effort in deducing certain underlying properties of the system observed; accounts of its principal institutionalised norms and statuses. In that sense, this writing is also a reflective reaction against other writings. The writing was not merely an attempt to project the Mullukurumbas as actors but also to create a paradigm to work out a study of the power sharing politics of the weak vis a vis the strong,

state and society. This study is therefore primarily an attempt to carry on a debate with others on what the protagonists of the study, namely the state, the strong and the weak are and are not.

## End-notes.

1. Cf. D.V.R. Rao., and K. Baskaradoss. A Study on Alienation of Tribal lands in Tamilnadu, (Ootacamund: Tamil University Publication, 1989), p. 69.
2. Lois Schenk Sandbergen, 'Women, Migrants and Tribals', in Survival Strategies in Asia, eds. G.K. Lieten, Olga Nieuwen Huys and Lois Schenk Sandbergen (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1989), p. 22.
3. James C. Scott, Domination and the Arts of Resistance, (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1990), p. xii.
4. S.K. Mitra. Power, Protest and Participation: Local Elites and the Politics of Development in India, (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 5.
5. Bob Jessop, 'Putting States in their Place: State Systems and State Theory' in New Developments in Political Science: An International Review of Achievements and Prospects, ed. Adrian Leftwich (Aldershot: Elgar, 1990), p.56.
6. F.G. Bailey, Tribe, Caste and Nation: A Study of Political Activity and Political Change in Highland Orissa, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1960), p. 243.
7. Op.cit., p.12.
8. Passim., E.C. Banfield and L.F. Banfield. The Moral Basis of a Backward Society, (New York: Free Press, 1958).
9. Atul Kohli, The State and Poverty in India: The Politics of Reform, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 3.



10. *ibid.*, p. 14.
11. J.C. Scott. Domination and the Arts of Resistance, (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1990), p. 4.
12. B. Kapferer. Transaction and Meaning: Directions in the Anthropology of Exchange and Symbolic Behaviour, (Philadelphia: Institute for Study of Human Issues, 1976), p. 102.
13. Richard Lannoy, The Speaking Tree: A Study of Indian Culture and Society, (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 199.
14. James C. Scott, Weapons of the Weak, (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1985), p. xvi.
15. Atul Kohli, The State and Poverty in India: The Politics of Reform, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 42.
16. Atul Kohli, India's Democracy, in India's Democracy: An Analysis of Changing State - Society Relations, ed. Atul Kohli, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 8.
17. C.A. Gregory, Gifts and Commodities, (London: Academic Press, 1982), p. 165.
18. Cf. Louis Dumont, For a Sociology of India. Contributions to Indian Sociology, Vol. 1. No. 1, (1957). pp. 8-22.
19. Passim. J.P. Spradley, and D.W. McCurdy, Anthropology: The Cultural Perspective, 2nd ed. New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1980.

## CHAPTER II

### A REVIEW OF THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES RELATED TO THIS STUDY

#### **Introduction.**

Having introduced the study, the next step is to place the premise of this study, alongside the body of literature dealing with the politics of tribal people in India and in broader terms, the politics of the weak. This chapter is predominantly theoretical and is divided into two parts. Part one begins with an overview of the notion of tribe. It must be mentioned at the outset that the term 'tribe' by its use has led to the emergence of at least three major shortfalls which all contemporary Indian tribal studies encounters at one point or the other. The term tribe referring to a group of people with a common ancestry and language, a shared cultural and historical tradition and an identifiable territory does not rest easily with many of the so called tribal groups in India with its unique caste structure. This part of the chapter merely looks at some definitions of tribes without intending to provide a different one. The intention is to create an awareness of a certain looseness in the usage of the term tribe, more so within Indian society with its particular history and culture.

The second part of this chapter takes a look at theoretical approaches considered relevant to this study. These theoretical approaches however, as one will notice, very often have been translated into practice. In the case of the state, society and the tribal people in India, certain approaches, seen in this part, have inculcated perspectives that are now so deeply etched in reality that, one

does not need to look at a body of literature to draw insights from. However, not all of these approaches chosen here are of that nature. This part has a specific objective. By constantly relating the approaches to the premises on which this study is based, express the specific lack of each perspective as well as their contribution to it. This, it is hoped, would help to place this particular study, alongside each, bringing to the fore its relevance and place in the body of literature on tribal people in India.

#### **AN OVERVIEW OF THE NOTION OF TRIBE.**

In the past, tribal studies in general and Indian tribal studies in particular have created problems of definition which any studies of tribal peoples must encounter. To begin with, there seems to be a wilful ignorance of the myriad variations among the tribal peoples of India. This has resulted in overall generalisation which pervades the tone of most definitions. Some definitions are looked at below.

For S.C. Dube, the term Tribe refers to a (1) geographically isolated (2) relatively hierarchical non-differentiated group of people with (3) a low level of economic development.<sup>1</sup> Other Scholars add to these notions such as tribes being ethnic minority groups, who in addition to displaying marked cultural differences from local, regional or national majority populations, are only marginally integrated into the social, economic and political cultures of the larger communities they border.

Some have preferred to define the term 'tribe' within the context of social change in Indian society. They have drawn attention to 'tribes in

transition'.<sup>2</sup> For Mandelbaum,

the direction of tribal change in India is clear and predictable. Virtually all tribes are now shifting toward Jati characteristics, a movement which has greatly accelerated, as communications have improved and external forces have impinged more closely.<sup>3</sup>

Srinivas and Ghurye have considered tribal people as 'backward Hindus'<sup>4</sup> or 'partially integrated Hindus'<sup>5</sup> respectively. Sinha has seen it as 'a devolution in form of a segmentary situation' where a 'tribe is a quality of socio-cultural integration'.<sup>6</sup> For Jaganath Pathy,

the so-called tribes in India have largely been a part of the Indian class society for a long time, and therefore, can hardly be cognisable in a separate context.<sup>7</sup>

Sahlins has considered tribes to be an ethnographic heritage from neo-lithic times. Tribal peoples cultures are according to him,

evolutionary advances beyond the cultural capacity of hunters. While territorial domains are associated with tribes, territoriality is embedded in society rather than territory serving as the basis for organisation of society.<sup>8</sup>

This duality in the conception of the tribe as portrayed by these scholars have an important implication. Analytically and historically, it has become possible to envisage that the world view of caste and tribe as two distinctly separable categories and yet somehow also see a variation in degrees, that can be fitted within the idea of a evolutionary change from tribe to caste. Also, a sense of community and reciprocity between man and man and between man and nature (rather than that of competition and coercion) can be dissociated from the above mentioned dimension of 'primitiveness'. A tribe can thus outgrow this

categorisation and yet retain its social boundary, an essential feature of its identity. For Roy-Burman, it is perhaps this analytical orientation that led him to formulate the concept of 'post-primitive' in such societies.<sup>9</sup>

As mentioned earlier, more importantly, all these definitions ignore variations both within and among tribal peoples. This has come about by focusing attention on contrasting tribe with caste groups as a source of reference. This, by acceptance, has shifted objective analysis into a subjective acceptance of a relative inferiority of all tribal people.

Except for Sahlins, all the above definitions are placed more or less within the context of contemporary social change in India. Added to it is a recognition, by some others, of a market network that acts as a catalyst for change. Evolutionary change from a so called primitive past is hence seen as the result of reverberation of this market economy. Thus a market economy, along with the influence of caste, have become the dominating ideologies providing impetus for change among tribal peoples in India. In fact, in contemporary thinking, caste ideology is no longer the dominant ideology and tribal groups no longer have to assume a rank in the overall caste system. The view most often taken is that of a direct interaction of tribal groups in a market network, the regional and the national economy, without the mediation of caste and an adopting of characteristics of the commercial capitalist system.

Definitions of other kinds include fondly paternalistic assertions beneath which lie a fundamental presumption of tribal backwardness and insularity in relation to the notion of cultural evolution and progress. For some, primitiveness is synonymous with 'tribalness.' In that sense, functional categorisation such as

practice of shifting cultivation, dependence of food gathering, hunting, low percentage of literacy are some of the criteria to class a group of people as primitive and by that tribal. This is most often the case and is seen in the statist view of defining and classifying a tribal from a caste group. Bodley cites such attitudes as part of a general pattern of ethnocentric ideology which legitimises the penetration and subjugation of tribal homelands in quest of resources and pursuit of national development the world over.<sup>10</sup>

Other definitions use as their reference the language of dominance. They take into account the historical, ethnic and social relations in which tribal people are moulded as a group and united locally against, to distinguish themselves. Here, status in terms of high and low rankings of dominance are used. There is a deliberate denial of tribal people being on a parallel plane to other groups around them. They ignore the fact that, though the tribal groups differ from other groups around them, the tribal people in reality exist in parallel worlds, depending upon each other to facilitate their respective economic needs, as no group is self-sufficient. Comparative definitions in sociological literature, using traditional belief systems and messianic deities as poles of reference, compare tribal groups to the marginality of a sect. While the origins of sects are usually traced to a religious founder, a tribe is always considered to be a group closer to a traditional belief system end as opposed to messianic sects.

In looking back at these definitions of tribes, this researcher agrees with Jaganath Pathy that, tribal groups in India have been generalised to appear as either (a) isolated and closed entities due to their unique historical and cultural settings, (b) ahistoric and static societies, surviving as a cultural lag or, (c)

homogenous and unstructured units of development production and consumption,<sup>11</sup> while for some others they are dependent on the larger society for their sustenance. To this can be added other notions such as tribal people being backward, are exploited by non-tribal people and because of (c) every tribal tends to benefit more or less equally from a given policy and expenditure of the state extended towards the tribal people.

#### **A riposte to the above review.**

In this study, the researcher takes the view that generalisations of the kind made above do not portray accurately the social position of the tribal people of India today. This is because they tend to either imply all possibilities for all the tribal groups in India or, on the other hand assume change to be linear and unidirectional: from tribe towards caste and from isolation towards integration within a Hindu Society. They fail to recognise the role of conditions such as size, location, history among others that determine the parameters of change in Indian society. For example, questioning the idea of isolation, one can agree with Claude Levi Strauss that 'in real terms what is meant by the tribal being isolated is that he was relatively free from outside influences'.<sup>12</sup> Or, defining the 'tribalness' of the Mizos in North East India and their response to change, it ought to make one realise that different factors are involved, restraining one from making a similar judgement of, say the Santhals in Bihar, or the Todas of the Nilgiris, in south India.

By attempting to draw a common categorisation, so as to encompass all

the tribal groups in India, these definitions fail to highlight the subtle differences that necessarily accompany each one of these groups, especially when change is used as a context for definition. Sanskritisation as an analytical category leads to overlooking how tribal people redefine Hinduism as much as it emphasises how Hinduism pervades the whole ethos of the changing tribal culture and religion. Conditions like size of the group, region, political space and history, among other factors play a significant part in providing specific opportunities for different tribal groups to define themselves. Yet, surprisingly, tribal studies in India has emphatically focused all attention on the generalisable commonalities rather than the underlying differences.

Some definitions, as mentioned earlier, also imagine a unidirectional change; from primitiveness to civilisation, from tribe to caste. They do not take into consideration the factor of adaptation of groups in the past. For example, Dieter Kapp in the case of Mullukurumbas suggests the possibility of them being,

forced to completely change their former mode of living and adapt themselves to their new surroundings and so, in the course of time experienced a gradual re-development into tribes of food gatherers, hunters and later on shifting cultivators.<sup>13</sup>

Note here the plausibility of so called tribal groups being an erstwhile caste group moving in a direction contrary to the above mentioned notions.

Also, some of these definitions fail to recognise tribal people as actors who attempt to actively reorder change. Instead, one is provided with the picture of tribal people being passive, herd-like, and most importantly politically inert. In reality, it is obvious that the Mizos in North East India by participating in high politics have carved out a state for themselves within the Indian polity. In Bihar,



the Santhals by bridging the gap between high and low politics have made their presence felt with the Jharkhand Movement. The Mullukurumbas finding negligible space available for them to participate in high politics are making the most of low politics. These examples show that whatever be the terrain of participation, tribal people are far from politically inert.

Such variations need to be recognised and incorporated in defining 'tribalness' and change in India. This involves the need to go beyond the recognition of apparent commonalities and a willingness to struggle with the enormous variations that change seems to bring about with regard to tribal peoples in Indian society in the present day. **The focus of past studies and its shortfalls**

An overview of these definitions leads us to recognise three important shortfalls in the study of tribal people in contemporary Indian society. (1) The focusing on the arena of high politics and judging political behaviour of the tribal people, based on their performance in that terrain. There are not many studies of tribal people in India which does not paint the picture of exploitation of tribal people, their neglect, their decadence and their squalor. This researcher believes that, that may indeed be true for many tribal groups today, but to end ones analysis at that point, does not project the tribal people as people who are politically active to the limits that they really are. This shortfall reflects an inadequacy in their use of tools of study and an assiduity to analyze only part of the whole terrain of politics. In this case, the focus on the terrain of high politics leads to a neglect of the terrain of low politics, where the participatory, dynamic active role of most tribal people come to the fore, especially in the case of small

groups.

With regard to the other two shortfalls, the issues lie spread on a wider canvas. One has to tread warily here, for past studies have given in to the following. (2) Mistaking the eclecticism of Hindu religion as a way of life, thereby incorporating many tribal practices and rituals. (3) The immense use of traditions and myths to substantiate Indian history, especially with regard to having a fair understanding of tribal peoples of India. It appears that they have played a large part in the prevalence of such notions, definitions and perspectives as seen above.

Let us take the case of myths and their use. All myths have the quality of generating - as Claude Levi Strauss put it - an 'interminable' debate on questions such as, as in this case, 'Who were the Hindus in ancient India? or 'Is it true that the tribal people - the so-called adivasis - were the original inhabitants of India, and if so, were they one homogenous group? Answers to these would reveal one important facet of 'Indian' history; the inter-twining of subjective convenience that is politically manipulatable and on the other hand, objective discontinuity that fails to remove such untruth.

Though this study is not meant to address these shortfalls, it appears that they have much to do with the definitions as well as the identity of tribal people today, leaving aside the strategies of political action adopted by them. In fact, these shortfalls are not entirely due to a theoretical myopia. It is to a large extent, the blurred reflection of a reality that is exceedingly complex. This is not altogether lost on the tribal people in India today. For, in reality, the political behaviour adopted by the Mullukurumbas, with which this study is interested in,

reveals among other options, the scope to define their identity in terms that bring about the maximum possible political advantage from both ends of this debatable spectrum - the calling of themselves as Hindus and yet being defined as a tribe. Is this a misnomer in ethnological terms? The contradictions as seen in reality and effectively made use of by most tribal groups barely reveal the shortfall of academic research in Indian history and society today.

This reflects, on the one hand, a desire to have a clear cut line of demarcation between caste and tribe, and yet an inability to make a similar demarcation between the high church of Hinduism and its philosophy and the so-called tribal practices and rituals on the other. Simply stated otherwise, if one is not intent on drawing lines, then the walls of Hinduism come tumbling down and 'anything' goes. Either way, it highlights another paradox of Indian society, left unaddressed by tribal studies.

In the specific context of this study one needs to mention that the religious practices of the Hindus are imitated by the Mullukurumbas for two major reasons. (1) It provides them an identity that is valued in the political domain. (2) It is also a method by which a buffer is built to safeguard their own religious beliefs and practices. Also, more importantly, one notices in Tamilnadu, and especially in Nilgiris, the society through a deep rooted anti-Brahmanical movement, under the banner of 'Dravidian versus Aryan,' has been able to redefine this eclectic nature of Hinduism in certain advantageous ways to itself. At the level of day to day practicalities concerning religious practices, Hinduism is interpreted selectively in such a manner that political convenience precedes theological conventions.

The point one suggests here is that these shortfalls should not lead to a failure to look hard and close on the efficacy of the tools in the hands of social scientists and the description of political behaviour of tribal people in India. There is a need to sift through myth and history, notice the difference and most importantly recognise that the tribal people like others are capable of using their past in politically valued terms. Crucially, above all else, make less haste in generalising change, ignoring the differences among tribal groups themselves.

### **Mullukurumbas, a tribe ?**

Before going any further, one has to answer the question, "Are Mullukurumbas a tribal people"? To answer this question one has to not only face the shortfalls elaborated in the preceding paragraph; an inability to fairly and objectively place the myriad tribal groups in India vis a vis the Hindu society, an inability to trace the historical background for many of these tribal groups in India and more importantly, the scope allowed for convenient historiography offered by the eclecticism of Hinduism.

In the case of the Mullukurumbas, in Nilgiris, this dilemma is compounded by the fact that six or more groups identify themselves as Kurumba. They are the Palukurumba, Alukurumba, Jennukurumba, Bettakurumba, Uralikurumba and the Mullukurumba among others. It straight away places this study at the crossroads of description. One option is to view them as different groups having the same, common suffix - Kurumba - purely by a quirk of misjudgment of past ethnographers of Nilgiris. The other option is to see them as a single group having for themselves different prefixes to bolster their identity in relation to

each other. The point this researcher wishes to make here is that such deviations from the norm, as in this case, only highlights in its own peculiar way the inadequacies of the defining categories, namely the who, what, where, which and how of tribal life in India. It is beyond the scope of this researcher to bring home the truth to the preceding dilemma.

Now, going back to the question, are the Mullukurumbas a tribal people? The answers certainly ought to lie in their past. Once again many different views have been put forth regarding the history of the Mullukurumbas. The canvas spans the extremes as it were. For more than one Mullukurumba elder, the Mullukurumbas are the direct descendants of Shiva and Parvati; the central figures in the pantheon of Hindu Gods and Goddesses.<sup>14</sup> Mullukurumbas also consider themselves as being sent to the Nilgiris as a result of the penance of Arjuna; another significant Hindu God.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, some other Mullukurumbas take the view that, they are the Adidravidas - the ancient and original inhabitants of India, of the pure Dravidian stock, who have resided in Nilgiris, since time immemorial.<sup>16</sup>

What is remarkable here is the absence of a clearly documented evidence of their past. This allows space for what cannot be termed any thing other than 'invention' of one's history. And, as it appears, the Mullukurumbas have indeed invented an origin that is expected to provide mileage, politically, socially and culturally. Also, this is translated in an idiom that is valued in the geographical space around them. At the level of the common man and woman in Nilgiris, the line between tradition and myth on the one hand and objective history are crossed with ease and appears free from contradiction. In other words, there

results a 'give and take' at the level of thought that is significant. The origins of one's group however implausible and non-verifiable is yet, accepted as valid and considered as 'real' history.

The argument regarding Mullukurumbas being a tribe or not merely begins here. For some Mullukurumbas, notably in the case of educated young men, the Mullukurumbas are pre-Dravidian, who were 'Dravidianised around two thousand years ago.'<sup>17</sup> They draw their theory from a site in Edakkal, in the state of Kerala, not far from Nilgiris where this study was carried out. They speak of a number of engravings made by Mullukurumbas, around the third century B.C. This is meant to suggest a long standing presence which precedes a Dravidian history in South India. But then, such beliefs too rest on fragile grounds when seen objectively. Either way, this would only lead us to persist with the question of the 'authenticity' of their tribal past, apart from, say, the reason behind the naming all these groups with a common suffix 'Kurumba'.

Let us for a start assume that all the different groups of people having the suffix Kurumba to their name are indeed one and merely wish to identify themselves differently as perhaps many Indians of the present day do. Then, there exists another plausible history, namely, that the Kurumbas are the modern representatives of the ancient Kurumbas or Pallavas who were once very powerful in South India, but have very little trace left of their former greatness anywhere. It was in the seventh century that the power of the Pallavas kings was at its zenith. It gradually declined owing to the rise of the Kongu, Chola and Chalukya chiefs. Here is another plausibility. For H.A. Stuart,

the final overthrow of the Kurumba sovereignty was effected by the Chola king Adondi about the seventh

or eighth century A.D. One of these chieftains, the Pallava Prince, Nandivarman the second was defeated on the south bank of the Kaveri river, not far from the Nilgiris and later fled to a nearby hill fort. This led to the dispersion of the Kurumba far and wide. Many fled to the hills of Malabar, Nilgiris, Coorg, Wyanaad and Mysore. Thus during the long lapse of time, they became wild and uncivilised and have, owing to their comparative isolation, lost their ancient culture.<sup>18</sup>

These four highly contestable and contradictory 'histories' reflects a duality; an 'invention of tradition' along side a 'construction of reality'. These go on simultaneously, aided by the plausible explanation of many historians, such as the above authors, among others. This is not a feature peculiar to the Mullukurumbas but to most tribal groups in India. This is due to the need to chalk out a respectable 'identity' to serve as tools for bargaining and manoeuvre in the polity of present day Indian society, as much as, a desire for 'historicism' of ones past in particularly advantageous ways.

Having said that, this researcher though disagreeing on the statist view of looking at the Mullukurumbas as a tribe, thereby implying most of the connotations discussed earlier, reluctantly agrees to use the term tribe to denote the Mullukurumbas, in this thesis. This is solely because the Mullukurumbas - the actors in this study - are comfortable in the political sense with this descriptive tag, even though it is thrust upon them. But, before going further, this researcher wishes to state that the areas of discrepancy highlighted in this section is of profound significance to scholars studying the history of India and needs to be addressed. The categorisation of groups of people as a tribe or 'tribal' in India is left to be desired. Aligned to that of course are the many assumptions that have become rigid theoretical strands of thought regarding tribal people in India

today.

### **Theoretical approaches colouring past studies of tribal people in India.**

While the previous section dealt with the notion of 'tribe' this section looks at perspectives used to describe the politics of tribal people in India. The aim is three fold (1) to look selectively at a few approaches prevalent in past and contemporary political theory (2) by generating a dialogue with the above, enunciate a suitable perspective that would clearly define the protagonists of this study and (3) bring to the fore the principal aim of this study; the politically active role of the weak in present day Indian politics. As mentioned earlier, the objective is to constantly relate the approaches to the premise on which this study is based. By doing so, express the specific lack of each perspective as well as their contributions to this study. This, it is hoped, would help to place this particular study along side each, bringing to the fore the relevance and its place in the body of literature on tribal people in India.

### **The Orientalist, Missionary and Administrative approaches.**

To begin with, one needs to look at the perspectives of the colonialists towards tribal people in India. The colonial ideology of the British understandably seeped into the perception of the social anthropologist and administrators of that time. Apart from their being evident in their significant contributions, it is also obvious in their treatment of 'caste' and 'tribe' as discrete cultural and structural formations. G S.Ghurye was the first to draw attention to this, way back in 1943, in his 'Aborigines "so-called" and their future'. This was in response



to Verrier Elwin's publication, which consolidated most of the colonialists perceptions in 'The aboriginal' published in the same year. These two scholars embodied in their arguments an engaging debate which in the present day has led to far reaching practical implications for tribal people in India. However much Ghurye attempted to demonstrate continuities and linkages between tribal and caste structure and tradition in Indian society, not only did the opinion of the day rest firmly on the side of Elwin, it laid the ground work for much of what followed. In the realm of theory, this has resulted in tribal studies having to focus considerable attention on negating certain views of the colonialists and their perspectives, rather than proceeding independently of the above.

The colonial administrators on their part seem to have viewed tribal societies as insular arrangements that were peripheral to the Hindu, caste society and further, they considered tribal people as politically placid. It is surprising that such a view was dominant. Perhaps, it arose from the particular history of confrontation that the colonialists experienced. They seemed to have made a categorical distinction between battles and rebellion, of geographical kingdoms and the nether regions where no visible authority was expressively exercised by an office. In the sphere of academia, this conceptual framework developed by the British administrators appears to be the inspiration behind the then prevailing model in anthropology.

Notably, the administrative perspective on the Indian social reality was simultaneously grounded in the British utilitarian tradition. Further, there was the view that traditional institutions in India were impediments to the development of a rational modern society. Social and institutional reforms was

an important calling for the colonialists. With relevance to this research, the question that should find a place here is, what did the 'desiderata' of policies and plans made by the colonialists have on the tribal people as a whole and more so, what was its direct impact in the case of the Mullukurumbas, in post colonial India.

The answers to these questions can be seen in the present, as in the years prior to Independence. One has to go no great distance to realise that in the present day, the state, instead of rebutting the views of the colonialists has in actuality, absorbed it. The immediate need for consolidation soon after Independence, as well as the then prevailing conditions, certainly determined the taking of such a view. Both politically and intellectually, the leaders of post-colonial India were constrained by the framework of 'Nationalism' and 'the creation of an Independent India. These dominating criterions saw to it that minimal space for different histories of the different groups in pre-independent India was to be allowed.

Not only were they condoned as parochialism, the great sacrifice of personal and group identities of the so called tribal people were laid at the 'altar of freedom' in exchange for a new identity - the Indian. In such a situation, it was politically suitable to speak of 'Unity in diversity', 'commonality in every difference' and play down the existence of such differences except in superficial terms. Descriptive categories and drawing of lines were the choices of 'leaders,' the 'framers' and the 'architects' of modern India. Tribal people came to be clumped as a whole. They came to be treated as the erstwhile isolates. Subsequently, with the rise of National Liberation Movements in the Colonies,

ironically their cultures were magnified and the myth of 'noble and contented savage' spread.<sup>19</sup>

The colonialist perspective of treating tribal people as 'noble savages' continued. In post-colonial India this came to be seen as a direct result of a primitive past. It is no exaggeration to say that tribal people in the present day are still seen as reflecting a picture drawn by the colonial administrators, as 'savage, barbaric, primitive, jungle, bantu, nomadic, pagan, heathen and other disparaging and contemptuous terms.'<sup>20</sup> Along with this emerged the idea of a big favour being done to them; considering them as 'equal' citizens in a modern India.

The continuation of an earlier approach in practice by the post-colonial state, with subtle differences, makes this approach relevant and important for analysis. The dislocation in perception of who a tribal is and what he is thought to be, came about by the continuance of the approach of the colonial anthropologists and especially the view of Elwin, thanks to Jawaharlal Nehru who translated it into the political domain in his 'famous' five principles of tribal development. The same categorisations that colonial anthropologists used was continued by the 'leaders of Modern India'. This resulted in the need for the tribal people to be 'integrated' and 'developed'. Programmes to 'modernise them' became politically vogue. The underlying assumption being that tribal people would be able to leave their 'primitiveness' behind. This philosophy of the Colonialists is therefore well and truly alive in the principles and policies of the modern day administrators.

Another significant feature is that the post-colonial Indian state has taken

an identical point of view towards tribal people which the British colonialists took of caste Hindu India. The Orientalist took a textual view of India offering a picture of its society as being 'static, timeless and spaceless'.<sup>21</sup> In this view of the Indian society, there was no regional variation and no questioning of the relationship between prescriptive and normative statements derived from the texts and the actual behaviour of individuals and groups. After Independence, the Indian society, bar the tribal people, has taken centre stage. The tribal people are now beyond the pale. British ethnocentrism has been replaced by State ethnocentrism. By that what is meant here a Hindu majority state perceiving tribal people with the same perspective that the British saw of Hindu India. Of course there is a recognition of variations among tribal people, but the underlying belief is the same; the tribal people are 'static, timeless and spaceless'.

In fact Nehru, considered as the architect of Modern India, drew up his own charter, on the policy to be adopted by the state with regard to the tribal people. He said that

tribal people should develop along the lines of their own genius and we should avoid imposing any on them. We should try to encourage in every way, their own traditional arts and culture. Tribal rights in land and forests should be respected, some technical personnel from outside will no doubt be needed, especially in the beginning, but, we should avoid introducing too many outsiders into tribal territory. We should not over administer these areas or overwhelm them with a multiplicity of schemes. We should rather work through and not in rivalry to their own social and cultural institutions. We should judge results, not by statistics or the amount of money spent, but the quality of human character evolved.<sup>22</sup>

These famous five principles that was laid down by Nehru, though followed in the breach, than otherwise, still supposedly continues to be the bedrock of planning and development of tribal people, by the administrators and politicians in India today. It is apparent from a perusal of these five principles, that apart from the above mentioned pitfall of generalisation, as well as taking a view of tribal people as noble savages, there is a significant neglect of viewing Indian history in a much more dynamic sense at the subaltern level. It also reflects an idealism that a modern state in its overall national interest has found incompatible to fulfil. Tribal people have come to be in the post-colonial state what the caste hindu society seemed to personify for the British colonial state. It has become a complementary component; the 'other' side that is needed for explaining and enhancing one visible side of society, by the use of the negative other.

Paternalistic development has come to be born out of this. By its very nature, it has forced out from its view the active role of the tribal people. While a whole new vocabulary of development has emerged, describing the relationship of the state and the tribal people in India, none has emerged describing reflex reactions of the tribal people and its impact on the Indian polity in a value neutral sense.

Ronald Inden in describing the orientalist construction of India states that for the colonial scholar and administrator in pre-independence India,

caste was assumed to be the essence of Indian civilisation. People in India are not even partially autonomous agents. They do not shape and reshape their world. Rather, they are patients of that which makes them Indian - social, materiality of caste. The people of India are not the makers of their own

history. A hidden substantialised agent, caste, is the maker of it.<sup>23</sup>

Now, paradoxically it is the turn of the Indian state to construct the view that tribal people have no individuality, that it is the group that is the be-all and end-all of tribal life, that, without the group, the individual tribal would be non-existent. It fails to see the connection between the individual and the group within tribal communities as 'a dynamic', as much as its presence in caste groups in Hindu society. In the case of the Mullukurumbas, one comes to realise that as a strategy for political action, they undoubtedly use the identity of the group, but, in the final analysis, the Individual is the maker of his or her own destiny. There is in each of the Mullukurumbas, an innate political sense with which one weighs the pros and cons, and participates in the polity of the Indian state setting off one protagonist against the other. The vocabulary of development does not include this.

The Missionary view, a later development compared to the view of colonial anthropologists during the British era further widened the argument. It saw all the roots of degeneration and evil in Indian society, in its religion (Hinduism). It saw the institutions of Hinduism as degenerate and base. After independence, major Indian religious missions came to view tribal people as inferior in a spiritual sense and hence ought to be brought into their respective folds. Not only religious missions but most scholars fail to recognise the significance of religion to such peoples. By such conversions, both immediate and prolonged, what happens, at least in the case of Hinduism, is the emergence of a 'popular religion'. Very often, this is mere superficial imitation of the other, even after a spiritual conversion, for deep down at a lower level, there is a

continuation, underground, of the religious practices and beliefs of the tribal people themselves.

This researcher believes that religion, irrespective of what it is, has the ability to be as in the case of the Mullukurumbas, an anxiety and tension reliever, while positively enhancing the social role of the individual. Therefore, it does not suffice to merely look at it from a moral perspective. For example, the missionary approach, by viewing the religion of the tribal people as something to be 'altered' overlooks, as in the case of the Mullukurumbas, the role of sorcery and witchcraft as political tools of manoeuvre that helps to create a 'space' that keeps the 'outsider' away. To merely view religion as morally degenerate and base is to be judgemental without analyzing its social role in its entirety.

One other important conclusion that these approaches cumulatively engendered was to impress upon many the view that tribal people lack objectivity. This researcher agrees with Claude Levi Strauss, when he says that the so called tribal people's perception of interest, rationality and benefit are drawn from a peculiarly self-centred point of view. Further, one agrees with Claude Levi Strauss when he says that

to attribute lack of objectivity to a tribal is false, .  
. . . all these achievements require a genuinely  
scientific attitude, sustained and watchful interest  
and a desire for knowledge for its own sake.<sup>24</sup>

In other words, what we find among tribal people and in the case of the Mullukurumbas, is a capacity to be self interested and objective. It is as common as it is among other groups in India. Not only, religious beliefs and practices but

all others therefore have a purpose and meaning for tribal people. Therefore to see them otherwise is prolonging the colonial perspective down the present day.

On summarising the approach followed by those colonial anthropologists, orientalist and missionaries whose interpretations came to be commonly accepted we find, that (1) caste and tribe in India became discrete cultural and structural formations. (2) In that sense, the tribal people became peripheralised, turning into the marginalised of modern India - they became the 'isolates' and 'noble savages'. (3) A peculiar construction came to be formed by the post-colonial state with regard to the tribal people; stereo typed as 'group centred', subsumed by degenerate religious practices, rather than canny political actors who have a sense of self interest. (4) This approach has provided the ground water for the present day philosophy of tribal development.

#### **Development perspective with specific reference to the state and tribal people in India.**

That being the last word, let us now look at the ideology of development. First and foremost it gives the impression not of change being inevitable, but more importantly a pre-conception that there is a proper and predestined direction of change and by that also of the future of the entity being developed. Within this paradigm of development the post-colonial state in India has come to see itself as 'the catalyst', to shake the society into rapid change. What existed prior to independence is seen as imperfect and incomplete. Hence, the society necessarily has to undergo a process of natural - assumed as such - historical change, or otherwise, has to be actively interfered with.



The Indian state has laid down for itself, especially in the Constitution, some of the basic principles of what a developed society ought to attain and personify. Apart from this, the Indian State has created extra-Constitutional institutions to carry on such a development. This synonymous view of change and development arose from the perspective that change is 'something that will happen by itself as soon as the obstacles to development are removed'.<sup>25</sup> This has led to, in the context of Indian society, development not only being an ideology of the state but also actively transformed into programmes and projects sponsored by the state.

For P.K. Bose, there are two strands of thinking on the policy of development. In contemporary India,

the Nehruvian policy of development has been replaced by an emphasis on the notion of universalistic values of progress and modernisation. What is reflected is an attempt to enforce conformity with the standards of majority of the population.<sup>26</sup>

Development, modernisation, integration, nation-building, state formation . . . has become, at various points, a fuzzy amalgam that most often means all of these concepts as a whole. Integration of tribal peoples into Indian society therefore is not only supposed to give them a certain legitimacy but also in a paternalistic sense credibility. This then has become one of the prime targets of development. This view of development is a fall out of the colonial perspective mentioned in the preceding pages.

The dominating philosophy of the Indian state however goes beyond this. Not only should tribal people be developed, but should be provided with a charter of 'positive discrimination'. The idea underlying this being that for ages in the

past, tribal people, now included in the Scheduled List of the Constitution, have been subject to a life of 'degradation' and 'injustice'. Hence, the state should take upon itself the role of providing these people legitimacy and credibility even as it develops them, by addressing injustice and degradation in the past.

As in other issues, this has led the state to enter into a path of encounter with the Indian society. It has led to society being 'set up' against itself in a scarcity prone environment. Many factors have led to an inability of the state to use development as a device to flatten society into a single plane to bring about the change considered as natural. For S.K. Mitra, this is because of the post-colonial state in India being 'soft'.<sup>27</sup> Development programmes, in spite of what the state professes has failed to provide tribal people the support in this movement from ambiguity to clarity in the short term, from a dual system of 'interdependence-hierarchy' based on compulsion, to one of 'interdependence - equality' based on choice. The state, which started on the path of modernisation hoping that intertwining of development and modernisation would lead to the outcome of developed tribal people, has thus encountered obstacles.

In the final analysis, we have a 'stalemated state', stalemated in part by the failure of the 'trickle down approach' that development was supposed to take. The belief that somehow pushing 'down' new ideas, new opportunities and very specially money could bring tribal people 'up', has failed to turn out as such in reality. Radical critics of this Indian developmental model include Alavi (1965), Frankel (1976) and Bardhan (1984).<sup>28</sup> This linear perception, that what comes out as outputs to the above inputs would be a 'civilised and developed' peoples had failed to take notice of some other factors that have stalled such

efforts, apart from the basic discrepancy in presumption.

One fundamental discrepancy is the false view of 'moral opposites' that development philosophy bases itself on. Having said that, whatever restructuring of development has taken place, has taken place only at the level of change in approaches. The exponents of this approach, having realised the fallacy of the 'trickle down approach', now talk of the 'bottom up approach'. The need to see the 'felt needs' of the people first, now that the emerging new order is different from the expected one. Either way, development philosophy of the Indian state has a certain in built fallacy. For Douglas Lummis 'development equality is a statistical absurdity and ultimate prosperity is an ecological impossibility'.<sup>29</sup> The point here is, development and change envisaged by the state has failed to materialise. Not all tribal people have been incorporated into the modern society, but more importantly many have been incorporated on disadvantageous - ie marginal terms. The central element of this marginalisation process, says Adams, is

some peoples have the controls they traditionally exercised over their local societies (and their own lives) taken from them, such that their remaining autonomy of action does not conflict with the wider system.<sup>30</sup>

For him development has become a back door to exploitation of tribal people. This indeed is true and many tribal studies have concluded the same. What has however been over looked is that the term marginalisation diverts our attention from (1) marginalisation as an illusory concept of a group of people who have always been 'in,' as in the case of the Mullukurumbas in Indian society. And (2) being in, their impact is not recognised.

Apart from all this, the word development has become a value loaded term, it has also come to mean the justification for the appropriation of many of the natural resources that was the basis of sustenance for many of these tribal peoples. It too has led to 'exploitation' being the final word, pinning the state and the tribal people, in the opposite ends of a conflict model. This is because the state has now come to possess two antithetical interests: (1) development and (2) national interest. Development theory denies autonomous political action noted by others. It fails to recognise the active role of tribal people or at its worst projects a pathological dimensions to their actions. In conclusion, development theory both in ideology and in practicality has inherent drawbacks. Development theory has failed to recognise the social component and the resistance involved in trying to create a new equilibrium within society. In reality it has led to the state and society to be at loggerheads on what this 'equilibrium' ought to be. Finally, the state has not been able to work out a viable balance between development and overall national interest.

#### **Democratic Approach to change.**

Going beyond the concept of 'one man one vote', this approach believes that its use within a framework of a politics of transcendence, in a developing society like India can reorganise change. But, as partially addressed in the previous section, what we are seeing in Indian society is the struggle not for the emergence of a 'nation-state' but a 'state-nation'. That is, a form of democracy, implanted in the soil of Indian society antithetical not only to its conception of equality of individuals but also to the unity of its ethnic and cultural categories

of people. This struggle for emergence has resulted in, among other things, a peculiar form of democracy, unique to the Indian society - a developing society - where, forms of western democracy are maintained but differs sharply from it in content.

This democratic approach one finds, does not enable the effective implementation of the kinds of policies considered necessary to facilitate rapid growth. For Huntington, speaking of developing states as a whole,

political institutions are weak and fragile to begin with. Democratic regimes are overburdened, catering to varied demands . . . preoccupied with maintenance of internal order . . . inflame social divisions and erode the capacity of the government to act quickly and effectively. . . leads to incapacitation of government, as officials base policies on short run political expediency.<sup>31</sup>

This approach holds itself on two basic strands, (a) institutions and (b) expressing interests through the electoral mechanism.

For Beitz,

because, the available political rights and the expression through electoral mechanism cannot be taken advantage of by the more disadvantaged elements of the society . . . inequalities in the distribution of material resources are reproduced in inequalities of political influence.<sup>32</sup>

This perspective has led to mainstream political thought on Indian politics to confine politics to the terrain of high politics and refuse to consider low politics. In the case of the Mullukurumbas, this perspective invalidates their activities for they are forced to stay out of high politics.

With regard to democratic politics in post-colonial India, it has been variously described by many, but most convey a sense of pessimism. For Atul

Kohli it has resulted in 'de-institutionalisation,'<sup>33</sup> Manor sees in it, 'anomie,'<sup>34</sup> Rudolphs see in it a 'collapse of institutions.'<sup>35</sup> With regard to this thesis, the point this researcher wishes to make is, in the case of Indian democracy, there is a back lash from society, attempting to stall the forces of change by appropriating those positions that are the bulwarks of change. Those elements of society that have been able to take advantage of this are what one can call the strong, vis a vis the disadvantaged elements of society - the weak in this study. The strong or the advantaged elements of the society have been able to firmly place themselves in this vital niche between the state and society; the democratic forum of high politics. Since that is indeed the case, any study of tribal politics, has to take into consideration this phenomenon of Indian politics; the over powering influence of the strong.

For Ralph W Nicholas,

inequalities in the distribution of material resources  
are reproduced in inequalities of political influence  
... leaving the disadvantaged unable to defend their  
interests through the democratic process.<sup>36</sup>

However, if this argument is valid, it would straight away, place the Mullukurumbas out of the direct line of defending their interests and taking advantage of the opportunities available in the Indian polity. On the surface this may apparently be the case, but the underlying reality is different, the state taken over by the advantaged elements of the society - the strong - still continues to shake the society enough, to create spaces for the 'apparently disadvantaged' to defend their interests, though not in the same mode as the advantaged.

If the present theoretical position taken by the proponents of this perspective speak of a stalemated and hijacked state they seem to neglect this; what may be lost in the form of expression through the electoral mechanism of high politics, is won by the weak substantially through many different options provided by low politics. This perhaps reveals the fact that in Nilgiris, politics is not altogether dependent on the electoral mechanism. A reason perhaps being the hijack of the state by the elites leaving the Mullukurumbas to participate in the forum of low politics, which is still considered effective from this perspective of self interest rather than from the point of view of the growth of political democracy. Democratic approach, in short, leaves this vital component unaddressed which in this study is taken seriously.

#### **Class conflict.**

Class structures, this theory believes, correspond directly with structures of political and intellectual domination. Differential control of resources lead to conflict between classes. Further, class is seen as the unitary force and the sole ground for social allegiance. With reference to the Mullukurumbas, they the weak ought to be the proletariat, in conflict with a bourgeoisie controlled state. In reality, what one finds is a competition for control of productive and cultural resources cast along much more complex lines.

If we take into consideration the political culture in Nilgiris and the Mullukurumbas as the basis for reference, what emerges then is a conflict both within the 'Marxian proletariat' as much as a conflict between the Bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Also, in the context of Indian society, in terms of norms and

boundaries as well as in the drawing up of constituency lines of Indian democratic politics, the complexity of responses, is on the one hand highly localised, as well as, when seen on a panoramic Indian scale, extremely varied. The generalisation fails.

Hence, no longer can we assume, as Marx did that 'class structures correspond directly with structures of political and intellectual domination.'<sup>37</sup> In the final analysis, a purely Marxist perspective of class politics constrains our understanding of the politics of the weak. There is more fluidity and pragmatism that is, ironically, well sustained in their reactions. This study intends to highlight that.

#### **Hermeneutic and meaning centred theories.**

Here social life is considered to be inextricably shaped by culture and meaning, since actors use their understanding to adjust to and change the world of which they are part of. The perspective is socio-genetic, examining the forms and meanings of a peoples way of life and the circumstances involved in their sustenance and change. It claims locality as the unit of analysis and treats societies, even villages, as if they were islands unto themselves, with little sense of the larger system of relations in which these units are embedded.

This study makes partial use of this approach by looking at the Mullukurumbas as actors whose action are shaped by the overall culture and the specific meaning that they give to them. In most general terms, the approach adopted here in this thesis is similar to Robert Hefner's in his study of the highlanders of mountain Java, which is both interpretative and circumstantial.



This research seeks first of all, to understand the politics and economic change as experienced by the Mullukurumbas in Nilgiris. For J.A. Barnes,

Once we leave the national level we have to hunt more carefully for the raw material of politics, it is easy to see that processes of alliances, challenge and compromise, trials of strength and allocation of rewards similar to those seen at the national political level . . . Political behaviour is here intimately bound up with actions that are aimed at other non-political ends and can be isolated from those other aspects only analytically, not in terms of space, time or personnel only.<sup>38</sup>

He goes on to explain that at the local level,

either these political processes are carried on within an institutional framework ostensibly intended for some other purpose. . . or they cut across the institutional division of society and succeed because relationship established in one context are utilised in another.<sup>39</sup>

In that sense, in order to understand low politics of the weak and its raw material, one needs to look at political behaviour that is intimately bound up with action aimed at other seemingly non-political ends and carried on within an institutional framework, in the case of the Mullukurumbas, the institution of family and religion. In this study, this researcher believes it is a sustained institutional response, that results in political behaviour providing a framework for the emergence of creative raw material for sustained low politics. This is seen as serving a viable and productive alternative as a consequence of denial of entry into high politics.

Equally important however, this approach also aspires to account for the practical circumstances that constrain the economic actions and conditioned the awareness of the weak Mullukurumbas. Instead of being exclusively symbolic or

hermeneutic in nature, this account will also make use of causal or genetic hypothesising.<sup>40</sup> The perspective is socio-genetic, which is to say, it examines the forms and meanings of a peoples way of life and the circumstances involved in their sustenance and change. For one agrees with C.F. Keyes that

only through such a dialectical tacking between activity and constraint can we hope to escape from the ritual either / or choice between objectivism and subjectivism that continues to plague modern social enquiry.<sup>41</sup>

However unlike most studies that use this perspective this study is not a single village study because single village study assumes among other things (a) an autonomy of rural life and institutions (b) holism of village life that ignores the reverberating influence of politics external to the village and (c) the degree of consensus in the social order of villages which the functionalist perspective had promoted. It also lacks an emphasis on linkages both institutional, such as rural-urban, peasant-elite, caste-class and conceptual such as emphasis on comparison, historicity, on integrative principles of political economy and on social unity.

In recent years, a number of authors have commented that the study of political economic change requires a new style of 'middle-range' analysis. The middle range analysis that is adopted in this thesis creates a framework within which the four protagonists - the state, society, the strong and the weak - the Mullukurumbas - encounter each other. The arena is sufficiently middle-range in the sense that it adopts the Nilgiris district as the focus of study. It is so, because the researcher believes that any further widening of the framework would result in the analysis of the active role of the Mullukurumbas and the

effectiveness of their actions beyond it, becoming negligible in impact, to say the least. A middle-range analysis would transcend the antimony between, on one hand village ethnography and on the other, sweeping macro history,

George Marcus and Michael Fisher, for example, have spoken of the need for new research methodologies, combining interpretive and political economic research in the context of multi-local community studies.<sup>42</sup> The sociologist Norman Long has argued along similar lines. He emphasises the need to link actor-oriented methodologies to history and calls for middle-range regional studies to bridge the gap between grand theory and village ethnography.<sup>43</sup> The aim is, through such a combination of regional ethnography and reflective theorising, break the impasse in social science between those who claim the locality as a unit of analysis and those who focus on the determining power of exogenous and global forces.<sup>44</sup>

Having said that, this researcher is doubtful of the extent to which this theorising - which arises from this study - can be universalised on a pan-Indian scale. The reason is obvious; though the four protagonists are universal in the Indian context, the regional variations to the politics of India is immense. For Hardgrave and Kochanek, the politics of India is varied. For them, the political culture of different regions has its own 'values, attitudes, orientations and myths relevant to the politics and the social structure that helps shape these beliefs'.<sup>45</sup>

In spite of this, this approach helps to look at those institutions of the multi-local community with their seemingly non-political ends. By examining the forms and meanings of a peoples 'way of life' and the circumstances involved in

their sustenance and change one can elicit the manifestation of low politics that ought to enlarge our understanding of the politics of the weak.

### **Rational choice model.**

In the rational choice model, the peasant is considered to be rational, individual and a utility maximiser. Here the actor makes his own cost-benefit calculations about the expected returns on his own inputs. He is making estimates of his own credibility and capability as a political entrepreneur to deliver. This is a good place as any to answer the question, are the Mullukurumbas peasants?

If consciousness determines who is a tribal and who, a peasant, then one needs to see when a pure tribal turns into a pure peasant. In the case of the Mullukurumbas, they have small plots of land. They are inevitably linked to a regional economy which conditions what those small plots of land and their input and output mean. The need for description to be clear cut, does not enable those who live at the edges of classification slip over into the shaded zones of the other, as it were. No one with such small plots of land, as most Mullukurumbas possess, make an earning solely from it. They are neither here nor there but at both places most of the time - though their place is at the edge of the academic classifications that apply - as peasants and labourers.

For Poly Hill,

the careless use of broad generic terms, particularly in the substitution of the atavistic 'peasant' for any other term, may simply betray an unwillingness to be rigorously thorough in a local or specific sense in anthropological or historical investigation.<sup>46</sup>

Mullukurumbas are therefore not seen in this study as purely peasants, though use of the term peasant is used to describe them, at times, with careful consideration. One point within this 'tribal-peasant' discussion needs to be mentioned. There is indeed a visible mixture of a tribal lifestyle with a peasant lifestyle among the contemporary Mullukurumbas.

Popkin contends that, in interacting with the peasants, the political entrepreneur can offer localised and selective incentives such as protection, labour and assistance in lowering rents. Hence, it can be argued that Popkin predicts the possibility of the revolutionary movements emerging and growing precisely in those areas where peasants suffer from widespread grievance and where outside organisations (political entrepreneurs) offer exchanges that are attractive to utility maximising peasants.<sup>47</sup>

In the case of Mullukurumbas and politics in Nilgiris, it is impossible for such a revolutionary movement to occur, for many reasons. The mechanisms of political culture disguises, as well as ameliorates, the differences that separates those with unequal economic strengths and conflicting economic interests. In other words, contending class interests do not emerge as contentious issues. It should be remembered that social forces are the sum of individual decisions and interactions between themselves. Norms constantly shift and are negotiable rather than fixed and culturally determined. Every individual has an inherent willingness to gamble and invest. There is a divergence between individual interests and those of the group collective based on what the economic theory terms the problem of the 'free rider'.

Why should this be so ? This researcher believes that it has partly to do

with the 'contextualisation' of the problem and what the valued means of politics are. For example, there is a failure of formation of identities, such as pan-tribal or class, or conflicts arising in the form of alien and insiders in Nilgiris. All of these are potentially viable contexts for 'revolution'. The specific reason is, for the Mullukurumbas, the other three protagonists - the state, society and the strong - are vying for space with their own peculiar ideologies. Within that scenario, the Mullukurumbas, wary of being overwhelmed by cross fire take their struggle underground. In other words, the open defiance is replaced by covert expressions of disagreement. The 'revolution' of Popkin is replaced by sustained 'nibbling' and an acquisition and conserving of valued means in the terrain of low politics.

#### **J.C. Scott's approach and the politics of the weak.**

Hence, instead of revolutionary or insurrectional activity we then need to look for other forms of expression of dissent. For Scott (1976,1985, 1989) it appears as everyday forms of peasant resistance. The latter refers to small scale and apparently innocuous activity undertaken by peasants on an individual basis, corresponding to 'generalised non-compliance by thousands of peasants'<sup>48</sup> and consists of actions such as 'foot-dragging, dissimulation, desertion, false compliance, feigned ignorance, slander, arson and sabotage'.<sup>49</sup> The importance of such action, Scott argues, lies in the fact that they require no co-ordination or planning (in a word spontaneous), they make use of implicit understandings and networks, they often represent a form of individual self and they typically avoid any direct confrontation with authority. He concludes that in many ways

'everyday form of peasant resistance' is a more effective form of action in that, through this, peasants are more likely to achieve the goals they fail to obtain in the course of the more dramatic large scale rural mass mobilisation.

For Scott, the concept of 'class' is synonymous with the category 'peasant' and seemingly radical notions such as 'ordinary means of class struggle' together with 'everyday forms of class resistance' thus refer mainly to conflict between the peasantry as a whole and the state.<sup>50</sup> The reference by Scott to class as a social stratification' rather than relations of production confirms his non-marxist use of the term.<sup>51</sup> Scott is then able to claim that, as a 'class', peasants are able to discharge an independent historical role.

Everyday forms of resistance can be undertaken by all socio-economic agents against the state, a point conceded by Scott. He attempts to rescue his characterisation of this kind of action, as resistance from below, by claiming that it usually involves a 'weaker' party struggling against an institutional opponent that controls the state apparatus, and that all those engaged in such action operate with a concept of injustice which needs rectifying.<sup>52</sup>

One criticism of this form of resistance is that it is not confined to the weak. Landlords and capitalists are not only capable of undertaking 'everyday forms of peasant resistance' but like poor peasants and workers also do this on the basis of injustice. A further problem is that, although new social movements are directed against the state, both modes ( resistance not revolution ) and form ( aestheticisation of revolt, or cultural opposition ) of mobilisation effectively preclude a realistic challenge to the power and existence of the state itself.

This point is recognised by Evers who observes that new social movements

are basically about 'every-day social (and socio-cultural) relations and not about the capture of political power'.<sup>53</sup> For this researcher, even though land lords and capitalists may undertake these actions and may even justify their action on the basis of injustice, for the weak it is very often the only way of reacting to the injustice that they encounter. With regard to the effectiveness of such forms of actions to preclude a realistic challenge to the power and existence of the state itself, one needs to realise that in India, as in Nilgiris, the challenge to the power and existence of the state is much more from the strong than the weak.

In that sense, the final fall of the state - if indeed that is an eventuality - arguably, would be as much if not more, due to the strong than the weak. What we need to realise here is that the weak are not against the state, aiming at its overthrow, but the reason is much more fundamental - their survival. Secondly, for the weak, it is not the state which personifies their nemesis but a combination of visible persons and not so visible conditions of society. In that sense. in Nilgiris, the weak - the Mullukurumbas - are resisting the strong and the society no less than the state.

Further, for Scott, the unit of analysis is the village, where the harsh environment exacerbates differences in economic interests, periodically threatening the very existence of the inhabitants.

The village collective and the traditional patron - client relationship is a significant source of welfare and security in the pre-Capitalist system. Peasants thus cling tenaciously to these institutions and resist the encroachment of the market economy because it threatens the stability of the closed corporate community.<sup>54</sup>

This researcher realises that in the case of the Mullukurumbas, they do



not contextualise threat as focused on the village but on their tribalness, their group. This researcher hastens to add, that it is not academically sound to straight jacket the response of the weak into any one particular mode. Also, one disagrees with Scott who sees resistance as spontaneous and thus negates the possibility of an institutionalised response of the weak. Instead, what one notices among the Mullukurumbas is, not only resistance being spontaneous but significantly, institutionalised within the religion or family or group or even a region among other possibilities. For the Mullukurumbas, the institution of village is comparatively a far less important source of welfare and security as much as the group. This researcher realises that the Mullukurumbas resist far more in that context; the context of the group based on its institutions of religion and family, than as constituents of a village. Therefore, it is in that context that one needs to explore these institutions of the group and their connection to the behaviour of the individuals.

#### **The subaltern approach and the politics of the weak.**

For the subalterns, protest movements are 'consciously determined actions . . . representing a frontal challenge to the state authority.'<sup>55</sup> This study is not an attempt to analyze a protest movement of the Mullukurumbas against the state simply because (1) there is no frontal challenge to state authority. (2) There is no visible protest movement. Nevertheless, what is observable are the same forms of 'consciously determined actions' though it does not openly defy the order. Yet remarkably, one notices in this study that the weak play apparently to norms laid down by the other protagonists - the state, society and the strong.

This researcher agrees with the subalterns that

conventional academic wisdom about the subcontinent stresses fatalism and passivity, corruption, self seeking resignation in the face of hardship and oppression . . . peasants appear as victims of history, not as its participants . . . rarely do they enter the pages of modern history in their own right, motivated by their own interests, giving voice to their own grievances.<sup>56</sup>

Where one deviates from the subaltern perspective is in terms of how 'grievance' is voiced. For this researcher, it is far more subtle than the bold and dare-devilish fashion suggested by the subalterns. Going further for K.S. Singh,

studies of these movements suggest that tribal unrest assumes an organised character among the larger, homogenous, land owning communities who have a relatively strong economic base . . . .<sup>57</sup>

If that be the case does that mean a 1300 strong group like the Mullukurumbas with a very low ownership of land and a weak economic base cannot express dissent, in an organised manner ? Certainly they can and they do, but, what is not observable among the Mullukurumbas is a Movement as suggested by the subaltern theorists. At the same time neither is there a totally 'spontaneous resistance' that Scott talks about. Instead, what is observable among the Mullukurumbas is a form of sustained dissent and resistance couched within an institutional framework of the groups religion and family. Moreover, it appears on the surface to mask non-political ends such as modernisation thus appearing to be a harmless form of social change by the group, though hiding within itself a release, that is commonly associated with the weak.

Crucially, for David Arnold, a subaltern theorist, describing the Gudem-Rampa uprisings, in the final analysis, the 'spirited protest against a changing

world, could not do anything lasting to keep out the forces impinging on the hills from outside'.<sup>58</sup> Same goes for Naipaul who talking of the Naxalite movement observes that 'Movements require a latch of passion . . . 'couldn't be sustained. There was the temptation of many to make their peace with the wider society'.<sup>59</sup> Both these observations are indeed true. The foray of the weak in the terrain of high politics is, in the final analysis, a spirited passionate effort that fails for the subalterns while for Scott, merely a resistance in the terrain of low politics that fails to overcome the state.

One needs to ask the question here. To what avail are the actions of the weak? Are they determinate? The answer is, perhaps it may be apparently so. The weak in Indian politics may seem to be at a dead end. But, if we are talking of a game which is not zero sum for the actor and where the down fall of the state is not a success of the weak but of a much more complex summation, then the short term gains of the weak need to be accounted for. Further, if we take the long term view that the goal of the state is what it is, as stated in the Indian Constitution, then with every act of the weak, the goals of the state are that much further away to being fulfilled. Therein lies the importance of this perspective for analyzing the politics of the weak.

#### **State - society conflict in india.**

Finally, one intends to look at the state - society conflict in India and find a place for the study of the politics of the weak in it, especially the impact of the state - society conflict. On the political culture and how the strong and the weak relate to each other within it. For Ashis Nandy,

the Indian society has a unique orientation to politicisation and political participation. It allows individuals freedom to choose his authority and follow his own beliefs rather than to try and actualise collective values. It views politics as amoral, ruthless statecraft or a dispassionate pursuit of self interest, to which many of the norms of the non - political sphere do not apply. It also views authority as a little philosophical debate on issues such as limits to political power, its role in society, and the duties and functions of those engaged in politics.<sup>60</sup>

Within the context of Nilgiris, this particular perception of power by the Indian society arises from (1) a fundamental absence of any moral sanction for the ambitious to rule, thereby making political power a somewhat illegitimate possession. It leads to double talk; an indulgence in a language of asceticism and self sacrifice and yet, the opportunity to vend even the most trivial politics as part of a grand moral design. (2) It breeds amoral statecraft which leads to a sense of cynicism regarding moralism.

Indian society, it appears, traditionally applied the concept of hierarchy to more aspects of life than did many other cultures. Today any activity which is within the sphere of power politics is by definition low status. This substantiates a point of view taken in this study regarding 'the personalisation of power. Politics is thus self-interest based. This idea can be summarised as follows: the Indian society creates the need for status and hierarchy on the one hand while it conceptualises politics as amoral and self-interest based on the other, leading to the personalisation of the state by a small minority of power holders, namely the strong.

It has become a well observed fact that Indian society's perception of dissent and change, is to neutralise it, by absorbing it into the mainstream. Very

often defiance of authority is seen as not aiming to establish an alternative power structure but to shift the locus of consensus within the existing authority system. This allows for inclusiveness of the weak, under certain terms and conditions. That is, because of the nature of society and within the particular dynamics of state-society conflict reflected in its political culture, the dissent of the weak can be heard. A space exists for the same. The need to analyze this becomes imperative. the question is, how is this manifested as a four pronged conflict ?

#### **The crux of the four pronged conflict.**

For Srinivas, caste in India was not in the process of disappearing. He saw it adapting in the most flexible way to new conditions.

1. Cf. S.C. Dube (ed.), India Since Independence: Social Report on India, 1947-72, (New Delhi: Vikas Publications, 1977), p. 2.
2. Passim., F.G. Bailey. Tribe, Caste and Nation: A Study of Political Activity and Political Change in Highland Orissa, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1960).
3. David Mandelbaum, Society In India. Vol. 2, (Berkeley: California University Press, 1970), p. 593.
4. Passim., M.N. Srinivas, Religion and Society Among the Coorgs of South India, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952).
5. G.S. Ghurye, The Scheduled Tribes, (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1980), p. 20.

6. Passim., S. Sinha, The Internal Colony: A Study in Regional Exploitation, (New Delhi: Sindhu Publications, 1973).
7. Jaganath Pathy, Tribal Peasantry: Dynamics of Development, (New Delhi: Inter-India Publications, 1984), p. 25.
8. M.D. Sahlins, Tribesmen, (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1968), p. 2.
9. Roy Burman. Problems and Prospects of Tribal Development in North-East India. Economic and Political Weekly. Vol. 24, No. 17, (April 29, 1989). p. 696.
10. Passim., J.H.Bodley, Victims of Progress. 2nd ed., (Palo Alto, California: Mayfield, 1982), pp. 8-11.
11. Passim., Jaganath Pathy. Tribal Peasantry: Dynamics of Development, (New Delhi: Inter-India Publications, 1984), pp. 17-25.
12. Claude Levi-Strauss, The Savage Mind (London: Weidenfield and Nicolson, 1972), p. 1.
13. Cf., Dieter. B. Kapp, 'The Kurumba Relationship to the Megalithic Cult of the Nilgiri Hills,' Anthropos, Vol. 80, No. 2, ( June 1985), pp. 493-534.
14. From interviews with Seyan and Thazhappan, Mullukurumba elders in the villages of Cherumulli and Moonanad respectively, October 15-16. 1992.
15. Kumarappa of Erumad voiced this opinion first and this was repeated by a large number of other respondents in other villages too. The influence of the television serial 'Mahabharata' was nevertheless very evident in such a point of view.

16. Raghu and Veera, residents of the village of Erumad and Devala respectively had this opinion. It must be noted that they also identified themselves as members of Dravida Kazhagam, an organisation that does not stand for elections but nevertheless is an active proponent of the ideology of Dravidian superiority.
17. The interviews with Raghu and Veera brought out interesting insights of the subtle differences in interpretation and the convenient 'pick and mix' attitude towards ones past. To be Dravidian and at the same time Adi-dravida reflects this attitude.
18. Cf., H.A. Stuart. Census of India. Vol. XIII: Madras. (Madras: Madras Government Press, 1891).
19. Cf., Jacquesm Maquet, Objectivity in Anthropology, Current Anthropology, Vol. 5., No. 1, (January 19 ), p. 50.
20. Jaganath Pathy, 'The Idea of Tribe and the Indian Scene' in Tribal Transformation In India: Ethnopolitics and Identity Crisis, Buddhadeb Chaudhuri. (ed)., Vol. 1. (New Delhi: Inter-India Publications, 1992), p.44.
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## CHAPTER III

### HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF NILGIRIS AND THE MULLUKURUMBAS.

#### Introduction.

In the earlier chapters the conceptual categories and terms used in this study were introduced. The Mullukurumbas were also portrayed as actors who, as much as being determined by others, determine their social place, by using the terrain of low politics. The objectives of this chapter is to present the historical background of Nilgiris, as well as the indigenous groups of the region. This chapter presents the history of Nilgiris in three parts. Part one presents Nilgiris prior to the arrival of the British. Part two presents the history during the colonial period.

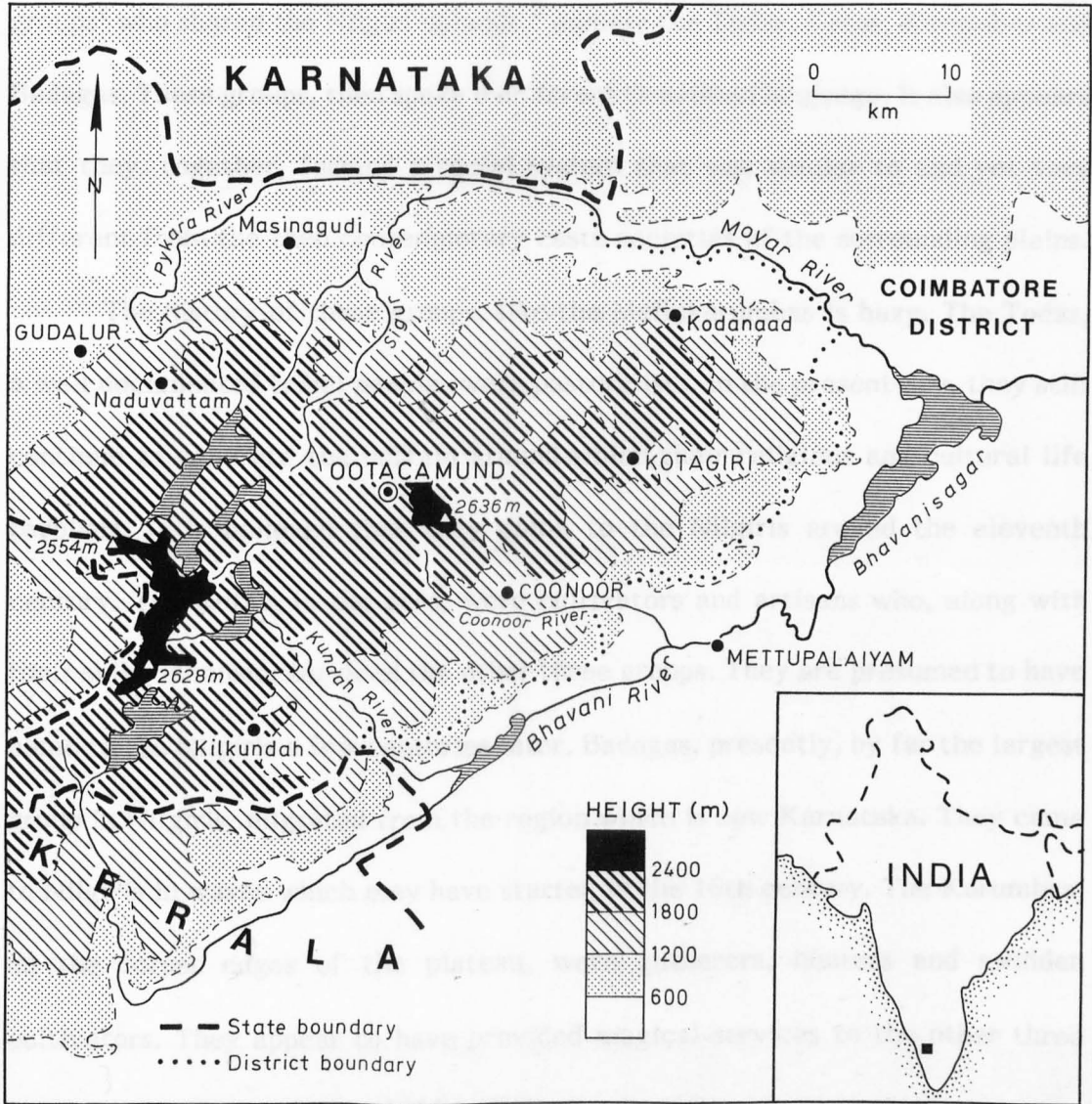
The aim is to notice how so called 'isolated'<sup>1</sup> tribal people were part of larger regional groupings, conversant with social transactions within it. This chapter along with the next aims to highlights change as change in images of self as well as other groups. Further, to state how the active role of the Mullukurumbas constantly becomes evident through the changes taking place. Change here is not seen as purely externally enforced but also as a constant assimilation and internal rearrangement of social groups, defined as weak or otherwise. Part three, moves from the history of indigenous groups to the Mullukurumbas in particular, from looking at Nilgiris to Gudalur taluk where they predominantly reside now. Finally, to show that change as development has now come to be the conceptually paradigmatic view of the state.

## **AN OVERVIEW OF NILGIRIS AND ITS HISTORY.**

Nilgiris, meaning 'blue mountains' in Tamil, is a mountainous district situated at the junction of the Eastern and Western ghats, covering an area of 2549 square kilometres, at an average elevation of 6500 feet above mean sea level. Administratively, it is a border district of the state of Tamilnadu, wedged between the states of Kerala and Karnataka. It consists of four administrative taluks - Ootacamund, Coonoor, Kotagiri and Gudalur. Ootacamund taluk is a hilly tract with a number of mountains and valleys. It has within it the tallest peak in South India, Dodabetta at an altitude of 8460 feet. Coonoor and Kotagiri taluks are also hilly tracts with an average height of 6000 feet above mean sea level. Gudalur taluk has two distinct tracts, O'valley to the east and Wyanaad to the west. O'valley is a hilly tract while Wyanaad is table land, though both are situated at an average height of 3500 feet above mean sea level. The major rivers flowing in the region are the river Bhavani to the south, the river Moyar to the north as well as the river Pykara which flows through the taluk of Gudalur. The forest range along the western slopes of the Ghats extend to the well known reserved forests, namely Silent valley to the south and Mudumalai to the north.

This chapter breaks up the history of the region into three periods. They are the (1) pre-British (2) British and (3) post-independence periods. This study has drawn extensively on other writings with regard to the first two periods. It is written in a form that is a reaction to this cumulative writing rather than a mere inclusion of passages from the same.

# TOPOGRAPHY OF NILGIRIS



## **Nilgiris during the pre-British era.**

The earliest writings on the tribal peoples of Nilgiris is by an European, Father Jacomo Finicio. It was as early as 1603. His writings tell of 'remarkable groups' who shared the Nilgiri uplands.<sup>2</sup> namely the Todas, Kotas, Kurumbas and Badagas. These groups, then spoke a different Dravidian language. It also appears that they, together, formed a social system that was similar to and yet very different from the then contemporary caste societies of the surrounding plains.

The history of these groups, like the Mullukurumbas is hazy. The Todas, a well documented tribal people, were pastoralists. In the present day, they still continue to venerate the buffalo around which their religious and cultural life revolves. It is believed that they came to the Nilgiris around the eleventh century. The Kotas, in the past, were cultivators and artisans who, along with their skills in music, serviced the other three groups. They are presumed to have come to the Nilgiris a few centuries later. Badagas, presently, by far the largest group in Nilgiris, migrated from the region which is now Karnataka. They came to Nilgiris in waves which may have started in the 16th century. The Kurumbas, on the forest edges of the plateau, were gatherers, hunters and swidden cultivators. They appear to have provided magical services to the other three groups and were much dreaded by them as sorcerers.

The picturisation of these four groups in Nilgiris, however needs to be reconsidered. Three remarks are in place here. One, it should not be construed to mean that there were no other groups in Nilgiris, other than the above mentioned four. There have been, even before the 16th century which is prior to the earliest writings of the Europeans, other groups inhabiting the Nilgiri region

namely the Paniyas, the Irulas and Soligas, among others. As in other regions, there has always been a tendency to focus attention and academic indulgence on certain groups. In this case, one realises that too much attention has been placed on the above four mentioned groups. Though it can be argued that there is nothing wrong in focusing attention on few groups, what one suggests here is that other tribal groups in the region have taken such a position - back seat - that it appears at times that they never existed.

Secondly, there is no certainty as to the historicity of these groups and there is the plausibility that some of these tribal people were pre-dravidian. As mentioned in the earlier chapter, this researcher does not intend to revise the historicity of the past, both in Nilgiris and in India, but only highlight the immense void in accurate historiography of many tribal groups. Thirdly, about being seen as 'isolated and noble savages' . . . this is a case of extreme simplification of the history of these groups, who must have had an event filled history. It must have included events in the form of reacting to other groups, leading to migration among others. What is however evident from these writings is that all the groups - at least the four well documented groups, the Todas, Kotas, Kurumbas and the Badagas - were not native to Nilgiris and have come from outside the region.

Discussions this researcher had with the Mullukurumbas themselves regarding their own history only resulted in varied replies. This reflects most importantly a far greater interest in selective recollection as well as invention by individuals of supposedly historical incidents to suit the context of the conversation rather than a desire to reach a consensus on the authenticity of the



groups definitive history. Thirdly, six different subgroups in the past - namely the Alu, Palu, Mullu, Urali, Then and Betta Kurumbas - have been called as the Kurumbas. As far as the Mullukurumbas of the present day are concerned, they maintain a separate identity as much as other subgroups of Kurumbas. They do not intermarry with other subgroups and also worship gods and goddesses different from the rest.

The contemporary political culture of Nilgiris and its valued means of land, money and identity would have had no relevance to the Mullukurumbas or other indigenous groups during the pre-British era. Nevertheless changes are evident in terms of the valued means of this study. There has been a change from valuing (1) earth as a natural entity to land as a commodity (2) barter and reciprocal exchange of services to money as means of social transaction and the need to labour for it (3) identity as a means of social differences to identity as a means of being placed in a social hierarchy.

The arrival of the Badagas during the early 16th century was the last instance of a migratory pattern of outsiders to Nilgiris before the British era began. They presumably numbered a few hundreds in the 16th century and are considered to be refugees who spilled out of wars then raging in the Deccan. Unlike the tribal people in Nilgiris, the Badagas were relatively highly proficient agriculturists who, by their example, set about transforming the agricultural practices of other tribal groups in Nilgiris. They also outnumbered the then indigenous groups of Nilgiris by a huge margin.

The arrival of the British led to the now obvious consequences in the form of large scale deforestation, killing of animal life and introduction of elaborate

communication networks in the form of roads. The region, prior to this, must have provided a certain amount of natural fortification for these groups in the form of thick natural vegetation, a huge wild life and a climate too cold for the liking of the peoples of the plains. It ought to have kept these indigenous groups, relatively free from interference, to the extent of even appearing isolated and uneventful, in comparison to the well known history of the south Indian kingdoms in the plains.

Soldiers and raiders do seem to have occasionally put in an appearance. There is an inscription dated 1117 A.D which tells of a military presence on the plateau. Though there are a few remains of fortification there is no evidence of long military occupation. There may have been very little atop the plateau then to attract soldiers or marauders. One interesting fact is that a number of south Indian dynasties laid claim to suzerainty over the Nilgiris.<sup>3</sup> The shift from self-contained social interaction in Nilgiris was certainly modified by the immigration of the Badagas. Values came to be redefined. Every social group in Nilgiris were affected by these changes in values. In the case of the Mullukurumbas, one plausible interpretation for their difference from other groups has been their identification as sorcerers. There had been a certain fear of their magical powers and witchcraft. This led to the maintaining of a social distance that combined detest with fear.

In spite of all these facts there are only small bits of indirect evidence about the condition of the tribal people in Nilgiris before the Badagas became part of their exchange system. The evidence noted by Emenau indicates that the languages of at least two tribal people namely the Toda and Kota languages were

separated from ancient Tamil about the time of, or earlier than, the first recorded Tamil texts of some 2000 years ago.<sup>4</sup>

With relevance to this study, the dialect of the Mullukurumbas was different from the other groups. Language, over the centuries, especially in Nilgiris, was connected strongly to the mobility of individuals and groups. Mobility, in turn, was connected to needs. These factors led to language, as in the case of the Mullukurumbas, becoming a mode of communication within ones own group. As change in values took place, language appears to have become modified, with dominant groups introducing and expanding the vocabulary of the surrounding groups. The present day dialect of the Mullukurumbas explains this. Just as much as religion is affected by the introduction of popular Hindu practices, so has language been affected by Tamil and Malayalam, the state languages of Tamilnadu and Kerala respectively. Nevertheless, the use of language reflects its purpose; their link with identity, just as traditional religion does.

The botanical evidence given by Von Lengerke indicates that the grasslands in Nilgiris are at least 3000 years old. If the Toda practice of maintaining these grasslands by periodic burnings is an ancient one and was essential for the maintenance of grassland cover, this would indicate some three millennia of such practice. These authors conclude, on the basis of botanical data, that permanent tillage was introduced only some three to four hundred years ago, a time period compatible with the presence of Badagas in Nilgiris.<sup>5</sup>

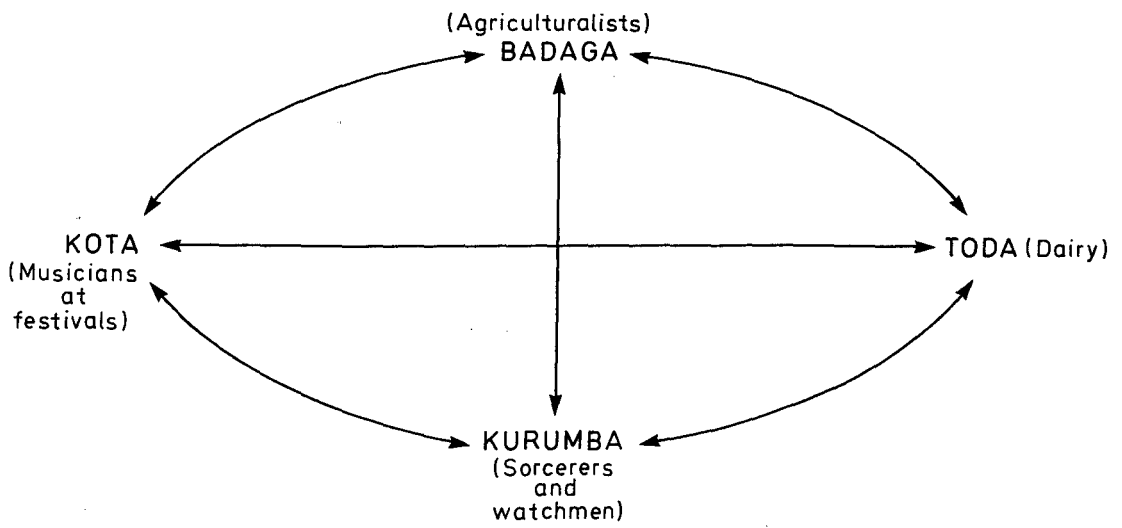
Land, it therefore becomes obvious, was perceived differently, prior to the arrival of the Badagas. The contemporary view of seeing land as a valued

commodity to be used was invalid then. During the pre-British era, when the Badagas introduced tillage, Mullukurumbas saw land as earth, which is still common in their conception of land. Perceiving land as a commodity related to one's place in the market economy is a recent construction. For the Mullukurumbas, earth was not a commodity. It related the whole community in a geographical context. The present reductionist perspective of land was absent then. The present value placed on land is therefore contemporary arising out of the socio-political transformation, further enhanced and legitimised by the post-colonial state.

According to Anthony Walker, the different groups of people in Nilgiris, resemble the peoples and cultures of the nearby plains.<sup>6</sup> In these respects, they are like others of South India; indeed in certain fundamental ways they are seen as sharing in the cultural main of the continent. This should not be surprising since the Badagas, who came to Nilgiris from the plains, must have experienced a then contemporary social life where caste structure had functioned as an efficient lynch-pin to hold society together. The need for migrating groups to recreate their past memories of social life in a collective sense must have led to an encapsulation of social customs prevalent in the place they left behind.

It will not be unfair then to imagine that the Badagas who migrated in such large numbers to Nilgiris and culturally and socially different in their form of living, would have rubbed of many of their practice on the lifestyle of these tribal peoples and vice versa. The greatest impact would undoubtedly have been in the cultural sphere - especially language and religion - as much as in agriculture. A ranking of different groups, based on purity - pollution seemed to

## NILGIRIS DURING THE PRE-BRITISH ERA



have emerged.

The tide of history which follows the maxim of the 'great leveller' meant the filling up of the region of Nilgiris, this time, with the social customs of the plains. However it should not be taken to mean that the indigenous groups in Nilgiris would have been any less 'civilised' before. One can only presume though that the Badagas brought into practice (1) a caste society - a loose one, (2) a settled cultivation and tillage and (3) a far more sustained need to look beyond one's own tribe for one's needs, all of which lead to the establishment of an exchange system.

If we take this as a plausible history of the Nilgiris, prior to the arrival of the Badagas, then perhaps, the history of the Mullukurumbas would seem to be different from the normal accepted image of a 'tribal past'. Ever since the arrival of the Badagas, the history of the Nilgiris peoples was seen as a domination by them, highlighting once again, the strong - in this case the Badagas - pushing the weak like the Mullukurumbas out of the visible, creative significant actor role by historians.

The groups present in the Nilgiris obviously would have had their own kind of lifestyles, with their own special needs. This seems to have been met in the form of services within a loosely imitative caste structure brought to the Nilgiris by the Badagas. For example, the sorcery of the 'Kurumbas' would have been valued enormously by the Badagas, especially in the new environment that they found themselves. Within a changing system of values, especially those considered significant in this study - land, money and identity - sorcery served an important purpose for the Mullukurumbas. The social interactions between

groups, at that time, required different inputs from different groups. Sorcery was one. It served the vital purpose within a set of spiritual needs of the larger social group in Nilgiris. For the Mullukurumbas, it helped to create an image, a duality of detest and fear, that helped them to decide on the required social distance with other groups. Then, as it is now, within a changing system of values, sorcery among other things, was used by the Mullukurumbas to regulate the relationship of their groups with others. It reflects the active role of the Mullukurumbas. This is one example of finding within their cultural norms means of help to adapt to change.

Placed in an environment that abounded in wild animals and forests, the tendency to see the strange and frightful in terms of manifestations of the spirit world could have provided the underlying reason. Similarly, the musical skills of the Kotas must have endeared them to the other groups as specially relevant to ceremonial occasions. The Todas who venerate buffaloes, would have been in Hindu terms, not only remarkable, but also a source of valuable dairy products for the other groups.

In other words, an imitative caste structure, though loose, allowing for a give and take, linking partially these different groups in a local network, is what European writers would have noticed. None of the indigenous groups in Nilgiris, apart from the Badagas, have any genuine caste affiliation or identification. The Badagas, who were refugees from the wars taking place in the Deccan, brought with them modes of social interaction. An overwhelming influx of Badagas, led to the introduction of such social practices that imitated caste practices in the plains.

Two important factors that compel one to state that these were imitative, are the absence of (1) a Brahmanical order and (2) a visible state structure in Nilgiris. Without these two, social interaction lacked the spiritual and secular dimensions that made caste society what it was in the plains. Interaction among social groups in Nilgiris was therefore imitative, loosely based on fulfilling mutual needs. More importantly, however, there certainly must have been an alternative socio-political network. It would have far surpassed the negative inward looking, insular group centred view that one commonly comes across. Mullukurumbas must have had a different history to the 'handed down history' tribal people in India are associated with.

#### **Nilgiris during the British era.**

With the arrival of the British as settlers to Nilgiris, the region appears to have been set for an altogether different and more visible kind of history. Hocking describes how the British established themselves, once John Sullivan had prepared the way.<sup>7</sup> The principal town Ootacamund, came to be the centre of Madras Presidency during the hot months. Coonoor, the second town, became the base for a large military establishment. Apart from a centre for administration and a base for the army emerging in Nilgiris, the region became significant in the thinking of the British for its larger economic potential in terms of coffee, tea and rubber plantations. The forests around Nilgiris became a source of timber. The discovery of a place with mild weather, compared to the hot plains was enticing enough for large scale settling of the British population, at least during the summer months.



The British regime existed in the Nilgiris for about a century and a quarter. Through the first hundred years of that period, the exchange system of the indigenous groups was maintained in its pre-colonial form. By the end of that era, the indigenous groups were deeply affected by, among other factors, (1) the British bringing into practice, their rule of law (2) the planter becoming a pseudo-jajman (3) the emergence of the concept of a state (4) increasing cultural distances among the indigenous groups (5) development of Nilgiris as a summer resort and (6) rapid increase in population.

#### **Impact of British law.**

The British on settling in Nilgiris brought in a system of local administration suited to their interests. Forests came under their purview. Forests came to be re-organised into private, reserved and state owned. This was the first time that a group of people - the British - who represented the state, laid down statutory laws and rules governing the use of forests. The very thing that frightened many other groups of people, including rulers in the past turning them away from Nilgiris; the large, sometimes impenetrable forests, was now accessible and highly attractive for British interests. Not only did the British have a need for the forests, they also had the expertise to tap it and the power of the state machinery to back the same.

The writings on that period mention extensive and lengthy debates that were conducted to determine how much land could be allotted to the 'indigenous people' who now came to be, apart from the Badagas, termed as the 'tribes'. The dichotomy between the British perception of 'land' and the tribal peoples

perception of 'earth' seems to have been left out of the argument. Land became a 'given' to the tribal people and it came to be called 'private holding'. It was a different kind of property that the tribal groups came to own in Nilgiris.

For example, before the handing over of the 'private forest/lands' to the Mullukurumbas, the Mullukurumbas exercised a certain intangible right over the forests that local chieftains recognised. While the boundary lines that were in the mind - if ever it was - was based on mutual respect, what became evident after the coming of the British was the (a) drawing of boundary lines on a more or less unilateral basis as well as (b) impressing on the minds of these people, for the first time in Nilgiris, the presence of an institution that would use force, to determine what and where one's livelihood ought to be, as well as one's residence.

#### **The emergence of the concept of state.**

This was the period of the emergence of modern political institutions. Yet, in spite of the avowed undertaking of policy initiatives as a response to local demands, the political arena did not provide for any active participation. This left the weak Mullukurumbas at the subaltern level, apparently passive onlookers. It was in this period that the stereotype image of the tribal people came into descriptive parlance. Two factors (a) a relatively low pressure to acquire the valued means of the present day and (b) the absence of a terrain of high politics, where tribal people could participate, seems to have hid all traces of low political behaviour from the view of political theorists / anthropologists of this period. (c) Also, the focus of interest that ethnographers of the day enthused was far removed from looking at the participatory politics of tribal

people, other than that which took place within groups.

It was the unleashing of the new forces of Independence and the incremental increase of the political arena that transformed power sharing and 'highlighted' the visible differences in terms of the strong and the weak. The avenue/terrain of high politics became theoretically available to the weak but the process of response in the acquiring and conserving of valued means continued albeit in a hidden imperceivable terrain. One notices at this point, the incongruence in the views of the colonialists of 'politically placid' tribal groups and the continuance of acquiring and conserving changing valued means by them in an hidden imperceivable terrain. Following on this ignorance of a politically active weak, development ideology came to the fore. The overwhelming power of the colonial state not only pushed the weak away from a visible terrain of power sharing, but led to it holding a particular point of view seeing in all tribal peoples primitiveness, savagery or at best, an arcadian simplicity.<sup>8</sup> The construction of this perspective by the colonial administrators was therefore fundamentally flawed, for it ignored this reality.

#### **The planter as pseudo jajman.**

Plantations emerged as tea, coffee and rubber along with spices acquired a world market. Large tracts of land came to be used for cash-crop cultivation resulting in the beginning of large scale deforestation which was compounded by the settling of large number of people from the plains. Enormous scope for labour led to such an influx. The plantations became a place for secure income, sometimes leading to desperate 'bondedness' for labour.

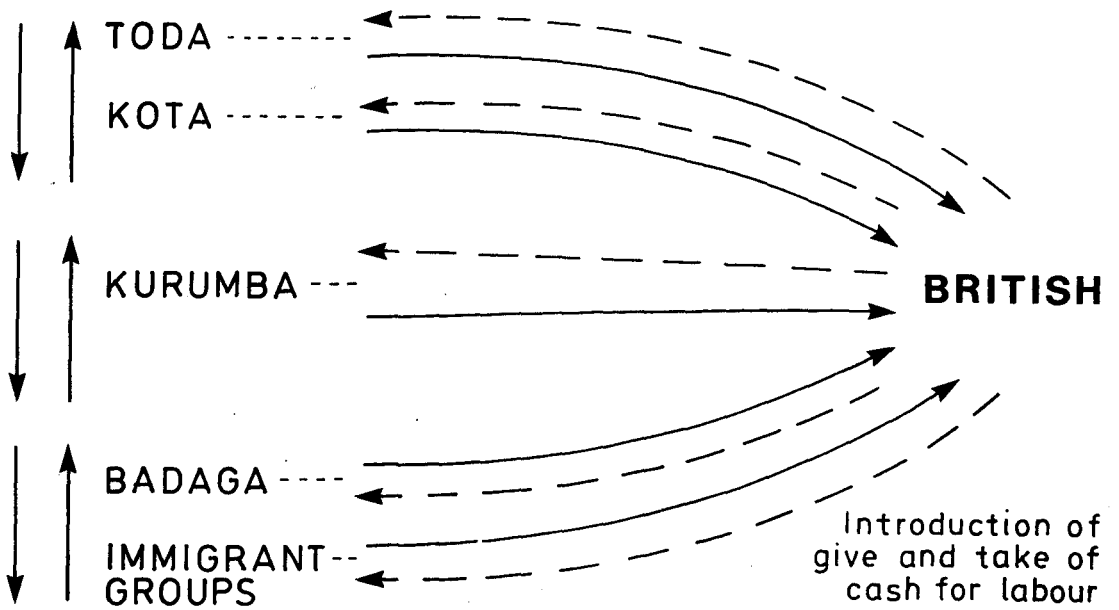
The emergence of a cash economy in Nilgiris shifted priorities in work for all people in the Nilgiris. The number of immigrant residents of the district became larger than that of the lower inhabitants. A cash economy, which brought into existence for the first time the need for these indigenous groups to 'earn', must have been extremely different from the barter economy of the past. The loose exchange system that existed prior to the arrival of the British would not have been able to withstand the simultaneous influx of immigrants and a cash economy as the dominant form of exchange. The rapid and extensive conversion of forests into plantations made planters the visible embodiments of this new economy in the eyes of the tribal people.

#### **Increasing cultural distance between indigenous groups.**

Among the indigenous groups, the Badagas benefitted most from the British regime especially in terms of agricultural practices, in education and as a result in Government services. They took as models for change the modernising Hindus they met. Kotas were too enamoured of the indigenous life to pay much attention to new opportunities until a reformer rose among them.<sup>9</sup> Todas went their own pastoral way accepting the British as a source of benefit, to be treated with proper respect, but not with particular subservience.

## NILGIRIS DURING THE BRITISH ERA :

A cash economy whose centre of gravity  
lies outside the region



The indigenous people for their part were experiencing during the colonial period, the first dozen decades of a continuing encounter with powerful nationalist and colonial cultures and with the interplay of the two. We now know something of how they managed and were managed by these encounters. Most Badagas readily adopted the ways of their counterparts among Tamil and Kannada villagers. The Kotas fought a narrow nostalgic rearguard action and then followed the Badaga course. The Kurumbas were drawn into plantation labour. The Todas generally kept aloof from it all, thanks in part to subvention by others.

#### **Rapid increase in population.**

The immigrants who formed a large majority of the district residents by the end of the period were plantation workers, town artisans and tradesmen, landless labourers and owner-cultivators. They were of a diverse jati affiliation and preponderantly from the three adjacent language areas. Most immigrants maintained ties with kinsfolk in their erstwhile villages though such bonds weakened as the immigrant community became a viable social entity in itself and as succeeding generations of the Nilgiri-born came of age.

With specific reference to the Mullukurumbas, this is the time period when external ordering as well as external accountability finally came to be a significant part of their daily life. The conditional non-interference of group life of the past had now been replaced by the non-conditional interference of the British led immigration into the Nilgiris. This cultural distancing between the indigenous groups was in fact the result of the decrease in distancing between

the indigenous groups and the new immigrants. Though no records, other than census statistics of early twentieth century, are available to work out the growth of population in Nilgiris, it is obvious that a trend had begun, which was to - with the progress of years - gradually make the percentage of the indigenous groups decrease and also peripheralised, to what now came to be called 'remote' areas.

### **Development of Nilgiris as a summer resort.**

The relatively cool climate of Nilgiris seemed far more amenable than the sweltering heat of the plains, especially during the summer months. For some time, Nilgiris became the seat of government during the summer months. The importance given by the British led to Nilgiris rapidly becoming a summer resort for the elite of the day. Both these factors - the summer seat of government and resort - transformed Nilgiris setting into trend the image of Nilgiris as a popular place for millions of people to visit, even to this day.

### **Independence and the Mullukurumbas.**

This section intends to move away from the history of indigenous groups to one specific group, the Mullukurumbas. Continuing with the effects of immigration, part of the Mullukurumbas found themselves within the district of Nilgiris after independence in the state of Tamilnadu. Gudalur taluk where most Mullukurumbas resettled, also had the highest growth rate of the four taluks in Nilgiris. Part of the reason was because, the Gudalur tracts at the northern foot of the hills which were seen as morbid places because of malaria, until that scourge was lifted in the 1950s came to be rapidly occupied.<sup>10</sup> Immigrants

from the nearby language areas then poured in and settled in mixed array.

In the larger context of Nilgiris, dominant peasant groups, who were also groups higher up in the caste hierarchy, steadily moved into the territories of tribal populations took place. Though this did not result in their extinction, as in the case of other tribal groups elsewhere, it had a tremendous and lasting impact on tribal people. In the case of the Mullukurumbas there was an increasing pressure to give up their 'lands'. The 'earth' in the perception of the Mullukurumbas came to be increasingly appropriated by 'plainsmen' alien to the regions. Often appropriation of land was violent and in many instances, the state, whether inadvertently or not, assisted these groups to acquire 'tribal lands' through a concerted legislative programme. This transformed the ways in which indigenous groups came to value land.

The post-colonial state differed from the colonialists, though both considered land as a 'given' to the Mullukurumbas. The colonialists took relatively greater care to stop outsiders from entering Mullukurumba 'territory' and taking over the lands. This is what the Mullukurumbas think of the colonialists in hind sight. The point that needs to be made here is that the pressure on land is more now, than ever before. This could be one of the reasons for greater incursions into Mullukurumba 'territory,' irretrievably leading to a conflict among the four protagonists of this study - the state, society, strong and the weak.

The second set of transforming forces during the British era came to be compounded by newer changes after Independence. Pressure on land was not the only visible change. Voting rights, followed by special constitutional provisions



for the Mullukurumbas, conclusively altered their status, role and position in Modern India. The politics of numbers combined with the politics of wealth further distanced the Mullukurumbas from the decision making power in the new democratic state. The drawing of lines of constituency further widened the gulf and legitimised the identity of the weak.

The 'self-sufficiency' of group life in the past, where the locus of power was inwards, came to be pulled out as it were and the Mullukurumbas were forced to acknowledge the same. Decision making in terms of power sharing was effectively transferred and certainly came to be outside the group. Village level democracy came to be, only at a conceptual level, a provider of self-determination and autonomy. In real terms, it amounted to nothing much when compared to the regional, state or national politics where the telling decisions on what tribal life ought to be came to be made. There was very little scope for representation of Mullukurumba interests in the modern Indian state. The active role of the weak was not only ignored but came to be effectively stalled by the rise of the strong. The dynamics of political culture led to the Mullukurumbas having to use the terrain of low politics to acquire and conserve changing valued means.

Seen from a different plain, the aim of creating a state - nation was veritably propelled by a reductive nature; giving relatively less concern for diversity in the thrust towards unity. The post-colonial state-nation, in policy and rhetoric, prepared to play down the histories of tribal peoples such as the Mullukurumbas. This reductive nature came to be morally encapsulated within a dilemma; where the post-colonial state found the history of these tribal people

dispensable for the greater success of nationalism. Added to this, the carving of Kerala from the then Madras state resulted in the Mullukurumbas being split under two different administrations and as a result experiencing different ideological strains of politics.

Before analyzing the impact of these external influences and the change undergone by the Mullukurumbas, a brief description of the development programmes undertaken by the state should be mentioned. The main objectives of the development of tribal people in India was (1) to narrow the gap between the levels of development of tribal areas and other areas and (2) to improve the quality of life of the tribal communities. The integrated tribal development programmes came to be based on the philosophy of physical and financial intervention in tribal areas.

Structurally this resulted in the creation of statutory panchayats at the base of a three tier system. Block development agencies and district councils were the other two tiers. Cooperative societies, medical and educational institutions were the other Government bodies that rounded up the structure of the 'development' of the tribal people. The end result of all this was, Mullukurumbas becoming peripheralised and the state assuming the centre of, for the Mullukurumbas, a mythical nation. The Mullukurumbas became the 'weak' and more, needed to be 'developed'.

Also, since independence the population in the Nilgiris has increased at a higher rate than the state and national averages. Many new Government projects have been installed, among them vast hydro-electric schemes, and afforestation programmes leading to displacement of indigenous people. Cash crops now

dominate agriculture. Potatoes, cabbage, apples and plums among other vegetables and fruits are grown for a national market, as well as tea and spices for sale in an international market. There are many more schools and health facilities now. The framework of state and district administration has remained much as it had been, though there has been an addition of elected officials to whom administrators are now responsible. The terraced fields in Nilgiris march up the hill sides as before, but they now reach higher and over more hills. The hutments of immigrant labourers are no less impoverished but much more numerous. The three towns are bigger, busier and more households that are very poor.

The Badagas are the largest single group in the Nilgiris, they ought to be seen in Klass' terms as 'the dominant landholding and managerial caste' in the Nilgiris.<sup>11</sup> Badagas, like the others have recognised that voting power is now a pivotal force. Factional disputes among them are played out in electoral contests and are about issues of power and material benefits as well as about status and prestige.

A Danish geographer Steen Folke described some characteristics of the Nilgiri region as seen by him in the mid-1960s, in two papers. He found that each of the three towns is a central place for somewhat different networks. Bus and other road transport well developed and intensely used. Cultivators having relatively easy access to markets; factory workers readily commuting to their work from outlying sections. Plantations too had benefitted from good transport; plantation workers were about 25% of economically active persons in the district. The average per capita annual income for the district was higher than

of any other district of the state.<sup>12</sup>

Constituency and commercial politics during the colonial period which was considered to be limited to a very small minority, after Independence was open to all. It nevertheless in some respects continued to be confined to certain groups in Nilgiris. The terrain of high politics has become confined to the strong. Political participation of the weak has shifted focus to the terrain of low politics. The political culture of Nilgiris that provides the canvas for analysis of the same is analyzed in chapter 5. Before one does that, there is a need to look at the Mullukurumbas on the basis of certain parameters and see how change mentioned here and in the next chapter has led to the formation of an identity of the weak. Since political participation of the Mullukurumbas, after Independence is seen in this study within the role of the weak as active agents, the next chapter relates this transformation before discussion of the structure of power sharing in Nilgiris takes place.

If the factors dealt with in this chapter can be considered as the overriding conditions of change, the peripheralisation and the weak image of the Mullukurumbas did not seem to be overtly observable in the first impression during the field work. A partial substantiation of this can be gleaned from the following impression of a Mullukurumba village. Though time indeed has changed since the visit of Steen Folke, the process of social transformation has made it appear as if tribal people such as the Mullukurumbas were any 'normal' lower-class Hindu family.

The family one resided with, during the field work in Erumad, had their son and daughter-in-law along with their two children named Prathap and

Pradeep - staying in their homes. Names different from the usual ones that 'tribal people' are usually associated with. Other grand children, through the daughter and son, who live in the town of Ootacamund, had come down for the weekend to the village. All the above mentioned children were school goers. They have a Television at home and watched the same programmes that the city folk enjoy, particularly, favourites such as, 'Oliyum Oliyum' on Friday nights, as well as the Tamil movie on Sunday nights. They had adorned the walls of the house with pictures of Hindu gods including 'Murugan' and 'Vinayagar' apart from goddess 'Kali'.

The children played cricket in the village green under the huge sacred village tree 'over 2500 years old'. Some menfolk said that they go out of the village to work in the local town of Gudalur. They had been able to petition the Cheran transport corporation to provide bus services right up to their village. There was a village school for children to complete the primary level, an elementary school about a mile away and a high school 5 miles away. A large tea factory a mile away is a place of work for most of the women in the village.

The men wore shirts, trousers, shoes and the occasional blazer . . . though the women continue to wear the tribal costume of a two piece of cloth for the top and lower half of the body covered by a shawl, especially inside the confines of the village. The children, especially girls, wore colourful frocks in their travels outside the village giving one the impression that indeed the tribal people - in this case the Mullukurumbas - have changed.

The continuance of the control of the group from within seems to have weakened. It seems to reflect a strong dual nature in their lifestyle. One saw

marriage photographs of a couple married in the Mullukurumba way, of their being blessed outside the village temple by the village elders. Yet, it was 'love' the man said, that brought them together, meaning by that, a certain progressive outlook.<sup>13</sup> However, the photographs seemed to suggest a strong social presence and the need for acknowledgement of their 'love'. The girl had 'worked in a factory in Madras,' the man said, 'it was an all-woman factory' passing a group photograph taken with the 'director' sitting in the front row. The man's father, now retired works in the field growing 'english' vegetables like cauliflowers, cabbages and carrots.

In reality, the Mullukurumba today have moved from a closely knit community to a fragmenting group. One finds co-operation replaced by competition and allegiance to authority within the community replaced by individual decision forced upon them by changes outside. What has happened however is that change has not occurred uniformly. It has occurred in such a way that parts of the group have become socially squeezed and stunted creating wide differences within.

Today the Mullukurumbas have given up hunting because the forest is out of bounds, by law. Some have given up their agricultural pursuits as well, because the sheer division of cultivable land has reduced their chances to profit from it. The choices offered to them has now narrowed to earning wages through labour for outsiders. In other words, the external forces have cut down available options of the past radically, though, on the other hand, this change is being talked of about as being within a paradigm of development. This 'developmental change' is considered as having been made possible due to 'outside' effort and very little

from inherent active effort of the Mullukurumbas themselves.

More importantly, the central focus of the Mullukurumbas are far from inwards. In spite of all the changes they have been exposed to, the active role of the Mullukurumbas is well visible. From the hoary past has emerged in the present day a small, yet well definable group, that has located itself within the polity of Modern India. Many images of self, as well as others, have shifted over the centuries. Much has been lost in the way and many new images have been created.

### **Conclusion.**

This chapter views changes during three periods, pre-British, British and post Independence. It reconsidered some of the writings on Nilgiris and their views. The immense void in accurate historiography reveals a certain simplification of history: an ignorance of some groups, non-inclusion of events and change not as a reaction of all individuals and groups in society. This chapter reveals change as evident in terms of the valued means of this study - land, money and identity: (1) The value of land as a commodity as against value of earth as a natural entity. (2) The value of money as means of social transactions and labouring for it. (3) Identity of one's group vis a vis the others within a social hierarchy. The roots of present day politics had been evident in the soil of Nilgiris even then.

The locus of power has moved away from the region further accentuated by change and development becoming intertwined with the state directed structures within society. This chapter provides a back drop to the present and

helps to perceive how the Mullukurumbas, who have persisted down the centuries, cannot be ignored as weak and by that, as non-entities. The specific history, as Mullukurumbas perceive it, has been the source of their shared norms, symbols and meanings of their culture. The changes mentioned here as history are however inadequate and partly mirror images of the causation of the perceived history of the Mullukurumbas.

Before this study analyses the politics of the weak, more attention has to be paid to the contemporary conditions that the Mullukurumbas encounter. It is hoped that by doing so it would help in placing the Mullukurumbas, though weak, as a protagonist who interact with the state, the society and the strong. The basis of this interaction, as mentioned earlier, is through a reflective evaluation of self and others.



### End-notes.

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## CHAPTER IV.

### THE MULLUKURUMBAS IN POST-INDEPENDENCE INDIA.

#### Introduction

Before one goes any further and describes the Mullukurumbas as actors, one needs to look at the following parameters which are effective indicators of the group's position in the social scale. The parameters include demography of Nilgiris, health standards of the Mullukurumbas, their educational standards, labour conditions, tribal development programmes, cultural change, forest and its place in Mullukurumba life, land, residential configuration of the Mullukurumbas, their participation in democratic politics and the market economy.

Analysis of these would help to provide a fair estimate of the kind of social group that contemporary Mullukurumbas represent. The objective is to show how a 'weak identity - as reflected by these parameters - have become ingrained in the psyche of the Mullukurumbas. The identity of the weak and the identity of the Mullukurumbas merge. The identity of Mullukurumbas find a political articulation that helps them re-negotiate their self-perception. No longer the easy victims of local power, but creative agents of their destiny. This is the cutting edge where most mainstream theorists on tribal people in India end their analysis. This chapter will explore it further in order to show how the Mullukurumbas use this identity of the weak, to reflectively evaluate their sense

of self in their relationship to others. It is also in that context that the parameters of change and their impact on Mullukurumba psychology is looked at.

### **Demography**

In 1971, Nilgiris had a total population of 494,015 of which the tribal population was 19,867.<sup>1</sup> In 1981, the tribal population had risen to 26,790 and so had the total population to 601,463.<sup>2</sup> By 1991 the total population in Nilgiris was 704,827 and the tribal population to 29, 584.<sup>3</sup> Gudalur taluk, where the majority of Mullukurumbas are present, comprises 50% of all tribal people in Nilgiris, while Kotagiri has 25%, Ootacamund 16% and Coonoor 9%. The total Kurumba population is around 4700 of which the Mullukurumbas number around 1300. This is ad hoc because no longer do we have census statistics based on sub classification of tribal/caste groups.

Regarding the demographic transformation of the Nilgiris, as mentioned earlier, there has been an overwhelming growth in the number of immigrants from the plains. At the time of the first official census in 1871, the indigenous population (Todas, Kotas, Kurumba, Badaga and the Irula) constituted some 40% of the Nilgiri population.<sup>4</sup> By 1991 they accounted for around 24 %. Thus, it is largely immigrants who are responsible for the dramatic rise in the population of the Nilgiris.

One other phenomenon that needs to be mentioned is the change that can be made to appear by the 'Census statistics' itself, in terms of identifying groups. Though not particularly relevant in this context, this raises a point which

would be brought up later. The point in question is the 'hinduisation' of the tribal people. The Mullukurumbas, in this case, are gradually being identified as well as identifying themselves as Hindus. This creates a certain amount of difficulty in precisely calculating the population of the group.

Increasing population is partly a result of large scale immigration including seasonal migration, where people looking for work in the agricultural and plantation sectors come from neighbouring areas. The impact of this migratory pattern, both permanent and seasonal has had a lasting impact on the Mullukurumbas, as well other tribal groups. The most visible impact has been in the residential relocation of the indigenous tribal people. Very few tribal villages have been left to stand in their past locations and those which do, have lost their traditional features and turned into settlements of mixed groups with a large percentage of non-tribal groups as well.

Prior to the British era, the Badagas had appropriated crucially significant areas of the available land in Nilgiris. The choice then offered to the Mullukurumbas was to compete with the Badagas for space above 1500 metres above sea level or go below 1000 metres above sea level and face the malaria prone dry woodland region. One reason was the recurrent epidemic of malaria caused by the proliferation of the Anopheles vector which breeds best in conditions less than 1000 metres above sea level. With the greater impact of modern medicine, the fear of malaria has diminished. Yet, it has resulted in the Mullukurumbas being pushed further into small pockets, as fertile agricultural lands, at that height, are being taken over by the immigrants. This is because,

like the Badagas earlier, the present immigrants have been able to exploit the energy resources of the environmental niche more successfully and at the expense of less experienced peoples.<sup>5</sup> The effects of the introduction of suffrage, nature of political institutions introduced by the post-colonial state is analyzed in the next chapter dealing with the region's political culture. At this point, the changes in demography and its effect on the resettling of the Mullukurumbas on a more general level, is considered.

With the conditions of numbers playing an important part in constituency politics, the Badagas voting en bloc have been able to, by sheer numbers, take over the electoral mechanism. They have been able to define their group interests in the larger context of regional politics much better than other indigenous groups. The result has been no less dramatic than in the form of dams, factories, plantations and forest laws among others, coming into existence. All of the above serve their group interests far more than other indigenous groups. This has resulted in a particularly unique political culture in which the tribal groups especially the 1300 strong Mullukurumbas now live in. A dominance hierarchy has replaced tribal interdependence. Valued means of land, labour and identity have now to be transacted in the arena of politics where numbers determine to a considerable extent how 'scores' are settled. At the level of the district, the small size of the group has led to Mullukurumbas playing a small part in the polity. The Mullukurumbas of the present day are mostly present in the taluk of Gudalur in temporary settlements and plantations while some others live in ghettos in the towns.

## **Health and medicine.**

Apart from the residences of the Mullukurumbas, change has played an enormous part in affecting the health conditions of the Mullukurumbas as well. One has to agree with J.H. Bodley's that social transformation leads to (1) transmission of disease, (2) modification of diet and living conditions and (3) social change and stress impairing the health of tribal people.<sup>6</sup> Transmission of disease has been rapid in an homozygous population.

Modification of diet and living conditions has occurred due to loss of land, resulting in consequent change in the traditional manner of its use. Relocation and resettlement has lead to alterations in food availability. Wage labour has led to an inadequacy of time to work their own lands. This has resulted in higher purchase of manufactured or processed foods. Malnutrition, dental decay and lowered resistance to disease has followed. Anaemia, sickle disease, scabies, kwashiorkor, marasmus, gastroenteritis, ulcer, tuberculosis and venereal diseases are now common among the Mullukurumbas.

Social change and stress has also lead to social tension. There has been increasing vulnerability to emotional disorders. This in turn has lead to loss of self esteem, increase in actual and perceived role conflict and ambiguity. Perceptive Mullukurumbas notice these changes as well as an increase in the perceived gap between aspiration and achievement. All these factors are cumulatively seen understood and interpreted by the Mullukurumbas in particular ways. Foremost among this is the view that ill health and sickness is a curse.

To the Mullukurumbas all disease and death is caused either by the

supernatural or evil men. Ceremonies among the Mullukurumbas are partially to propitiate the spirits. Evil men are usually seen as the non-Mullukurumba plainsmen. Sickness is understood as being under the spell of evil men and the need to resist. Therein lies the xenophobic side of the Mullukurumbas relation with the others. The view taken in this study is, within the interpretative framework of the Mullukurumba mind, the causes for their state of health is somehow seen to be related to the scheming of the others.

### **Education.**

There are 22 Government tribal residential schools in the district, three of them are middle schools and the rest, elementary schools. Education is undoubtedly of a low standard, both in terms of the facilities in tribal schools and the teaching itself. The scale of dropping out after the children complete primary school is high. Only a negligible percentage pursue their studies up to the middle school level. A fair estimate is that less than 20 % of the Mullukurumbas are literate.

Factors that contribute to attendance in schools are few. The one most spoken often is the 'Chief Minister's Nutritious Noon Meal Scheme'. It is primarily a free lunch for all children attending schools. Since its inception, it has been argued by government officials, attendance in schools has increased enormously. In real terms, this public distribution of food augments the comparatively lesser calorific intake of food by Mullukurumba children vis a vis other non-tribal groups. Also, text books, note books and other relevant



educational kits, including clothes for children, are provided free of cost.

Looking at the factors that still continue to create obstacles for the Mullukurumba children to be educated, some of them are as follows. The medium of education is Tamil and not the dialect of the Mullukurumbas. The curriculum offered, does not have special inputs relevant to the specific local needs and conditions of the Mullukurumba children. The need for girls and boys to be married at a very young age, necessitates a different orientation and attitude towards education in particular. These factors raise questions among the Mullukurumbas on the authenticity and utility of education.

Economic conditions are contributory to the nature of parental views on education of children. Very often the children are forced to augment family income by having to work. The irony which the Mullukurumbas find hardest to comprehend, is the utility value of education. For them, the more a child is educated the farther away he or she is bound to go, usually ending up in the towns.

The education provided by these schools lack any orientation towards learning a practical skill or craft and extra curricular activities. They do not provide any link to the traditional values and forms of social organisation of the Mullukurumbas. The rapid reduction in percentage of girls, as one goes up the ladder of education, is a stark reminder of a social condition that speaks for the obstacles that women confront in rural areas.

**Labour conditions.**

Nilgiris is experiencing rapid agricultural change. This is going on simultaneously when social groups are rearranging themselves pushing other groups out in the process. One fallout of this desperate rush towards agricultural growth and social rearrangement is the tendency to over use or abuse land. To a large extent, there is a tendency towards it. The over use of land amply reflects the enormous scope that agriculture and agricultural produce provides. There is a rush towards agricultural labour. Even as land is scarce and the supply of labour far more than needed. Mullukurumbas find it difficult to get sustained work.

Parallel to the agricultural economy, there is an expanding tourist economy especially in urban centres around Ootacamund. The elites dominating both the tourism and agricultural economy are drawn predominantly from the rich moneyed classes who have their base in the metropolises of south India. The greater part of wage labourers come from Kerala and are partly resident in Nilgiris. In such a growing regional economy, the Mullukurumbas encounter pressure to sell their land, the value of which rises every year. Both the elites and the large working force, having roots elsewhere, sponge off a substantial part of the money coming into the region.

In the plantation economy where the Mullukurumbas work as labourers, private holding predominates. The planters, who were described as the pseudo-jajmans in the earlier chapter not only control the wage of the labourers but also monopolise distribution networks. What is found in present day Nilgiris are lowly paid wage labourers linked to a national and an international market. There are

traces of bonded labour, especially of tribal people, as well as an overwhelming surplus of migrant labour. All these factors result in incomplete labour mobility, especially for weak groups like the Mullukurumbas.

The traditional livelihood of the Mullukurumbas which was derived from land, forests and livestock has become increasingly insecure. They are forced to seek employment where ever there is a possibility of finding work not necessarily as agricultural labourers or plantation workers. Mullukurumbas seek casual employment, locally through contractors, in public works, construction sites or hotels. Migration to towns for a few months at a time is also common. Under the circumstances, no longer can the Mullukurumbas be considered as hunter-gatherers, or peasants or casual labourers . . . they are all of this and more. The constraints of the labour market is a major cause for this transformation.

#### **Tribal development.**

Tribal development in its turn has engendered complex counter-currents too. After Independence, the Mullukurumbas have been increasingly drawn into a national network that has gradually shifted the locus of power away from the villages they had lived in the past. The philosophy behind the programme of tribal development is that groups such as Mullukurumbas need to be incorporated into the national mainstream or in other words, no longer be in 'isolation'. Mullukurumbas therefore are provided supports to face up to the pressures of competition from other groups during this process of 'integration'.

Development programmes are routed through bodies of local and regional

self governing institutions, in this case at the panchayat and block levels. Also, through specialised public corporations, which in reality deal with the major share of development. In practice, the development programmes routed through non-representative institutions such as these need to be profit oriented. This leads to development activities having to concentrate on areas of credit worthiness. In doing so, they go against the grain of development. In the case of self governing institutions, they are invariably controlled by rich peasants, rural money lenders and traders. Though one finds Mullukurumbas present in these institutions, their ability to use these institutions for changes linked to the valued means of politics is almost nil. Development however defined, hardly gets transferred into practice.

In Nilgiris, tribal development programmes - on record - include (1) land based schemes such as allotment of land to tribal people out of Government owned land, allotment of seeds for sowing, free water supply, free and subsidised distribution of agricultural implements, drought animals and fertilisers. (2) Non-land based schemes include distribution of milch cattle, cows and buffaloes, pigs, goats and sheep. Veterinary support for rearing of the same. Extension services and institutional linking with markets for selling of produce. (3) Skill based schemes include training supported by providing of raw materials, implements, working capital, work sheds, and co-operatives for setting up and running employment projects. (4) Education and health programmes include free education, mid-day meals for children and old people, housing, special privileges in Government jobs as well as providing seasonal labour. Added to these are

ration shops, which provide an important source of food subsidy for the Mullukurumbas. They provide access to food which along with the free lunch provided for school going children is arguably a significant percentage of their total consumption.

In reality, the overall impact of the development programmes has much to be argued about. The above mentioned schemes, spoken about so eloquently by the officials are not really visible in reality and those that are, are subject to heavy bribes and corruption. Apart from this, the way these programmes are viewed and made use of by the Mullukurumbas suggests that it is not considered as 'development' either. Development programmes therefore lead to a widening of the economic gap between groups rather than serving the purpose of supporting isolated groups towards integration.

#### **Cultural change.**

The Mullukurumbas, having to rub shoulders with an ever increasing immigrant population, now look at other groups as models for imitation. Even in so called remote areas, they have now become aware of their citizenship in a large nation. However, change has not come without a strong awareness of one's own identity and sense of 'tribalness.' It has resulted in a combination of xenophilia and xenophobia. In many ways, the immigrant groups are seen as outsiders and aliens by the Mullukurumbas. The term 'plainsmen' often associated with outsiders carries almost a derogatory connotation. The outcome of this love-hate syndrome has resulted in redefining the identity of the group as well

as individuals. Internal reordering of the Mullukurumbas is visible in the institutions of family and religion.

In terms of imitation, hinduisation and westernisation have been taken up in a big way. Perhaps the following phenomena has the reason embedded in it. The immigrant plainmen who come to settle in Nilgiris also bring with them a sense of nostalgia for their lifestyle in the plains. It is encapsulated - once again like the Badagas and the British earlier - in vivid symbols, in the religious, social, cultural and economic spheres. They build temples, celebrate festivals and perform rituals that are very different from the traditional practices of the indigenous tribal people. This is the Hindu religion and way of life that the Mullukurumbas observe. A Hindu way of life that is a highly selective version, having undergone myriad interpretations and selectively appropriated in time and space. If that partly explains the motivation towards hinduisation, westernisation is impressed upon the Mullukurumbas in more ways than one.

In comparison, the Mullukurumbas find within themselves in their community, a crucial weakness, vis a vis, the others. The Mullukurumba life style - an older, relaxed form of living - meets fresher, vivid, growing cultural forms that gradually in ever widening circles begin to constrict, disregarding the social, religious, cultural values of the Mullukurumbas. Xenophilia encourages the Mullukurumbas to celebrate hindu festivals such as Onam, Deepavali and Dassera. The boundary lines of tribal and hindu religious practices seemingly coalesce, especially when one notices worship of Mullukurumbas along with newly immigrant groups in some temples. Brahmin priests are some times present in

Mullukurumba homes officiating in auspicious occasions. But cultural change is not altogether one sided in a random, unselective sense, but in a shrewd, selective and dichotomous fashion, where an inner shell of the core values of the Mullukurumbas is encapsulated within a seemingly apparent imitation. Cultural inputs from these outside groups on the other hand has led to an overwhelming feeling among the Mullukurumbas that in certain fundamental respects their cultural life is being threatened. Cultural change is therefore feared as much as accommodated. It is perceived as a danger to Mullukurumba identity and lifestyle.

### **Forests.**

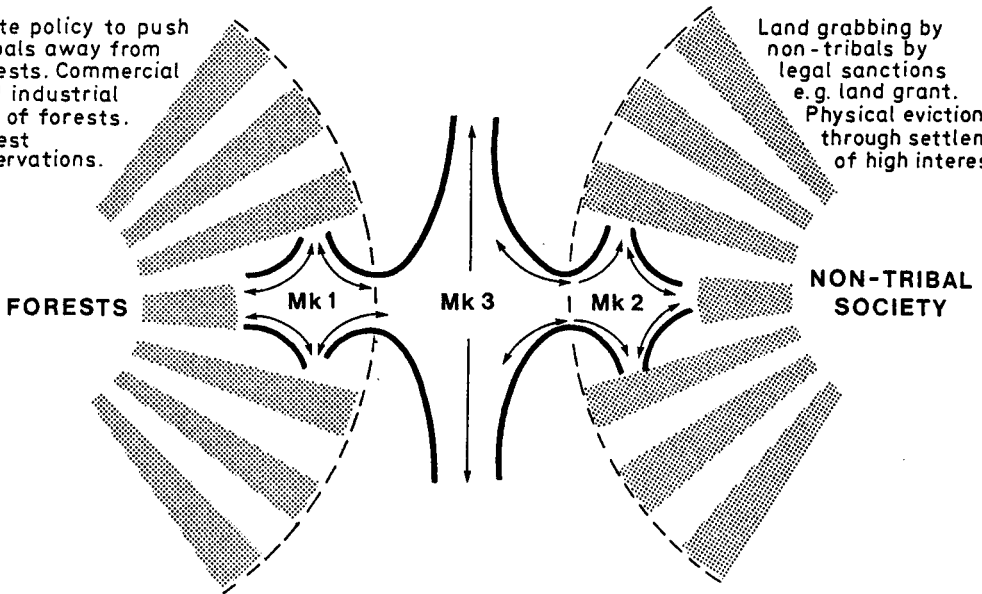
Demand for timber has led to large scale exploitation of forests. It is an important source of revenue for the state which regulates timber extraction as well as other forest products. Large forest areas in Nilgiris have been designated as 'reserved' and placed under the control of forest departments. In these forests, Mullukurumbas have been evicted or forced to resettle elsewhere or denied access to those forest produce on which they were dependent. It has become a source of conflict between the Mullukurumbas and the state which lays claim to the entire forest wealth. Where the Mullukurumbas are allowed access to some of the forest produce, such as dead wood for fuel, it is considered as a 'concession,' liable to be withdrawn at any time by the forest officials.

The Dhebar Commission, appointed by the then President of India in 1960, traced the changes in the rights of the tribal people over the forests. Subtle but

## THE SANDWICHED MULLUKURUMBAS

State policy to push tribals away from forests. Commercial and industrial use of forests. Forest reservations.

Land grabbing by non-tribals by legal sanctions e.g. land grant. Physical eviction through settlement of high interest debts.



**Mk 1** - Move with the forest boundaries

**Mk 2** - Move with the labour market

**Mk 3** - Stationary



far reaching changes have taken place over the years. It has been unidirectional, with greater powers going over to the state and a simultaneous withdrawal of rights to the tribal people. The following quote highlights one such transformation.

The traditional rights of the tribal people over the forests were termed as 'rights and privileges in the resolution of 1894 and became rights and concessions in the resolution of 1952.<sup>7</sup>

Forests which served as a means of livelihood and source of sustenance are now considered out of bounds. The traditional de-facto relationship to the forests by the Mullukurumbas has been replaced by the de-jure ownership of the state. It involves the exploitation of forest resources with total disregard for the Mullukurumba life and needs. The nature of forests itself is undergoing a change. The natural mixed forest of the Nilgiris are rapidly becoming single-type forests and plantations.

With greater consolidation and formalisation of ownership of the forests by the state and decision-making receding from the locality, the special relationship of the tribes with the forestry is no longer appreciated. Their rights are viewed as an impediment to the scientific and economic exploitation of the forests. Since the forest produce are treated as natural resources, the state stakes its full claim over it. At best, the Mullukurumbas may be allowed a reasonable wage for their labour in the collection of minor forest produce and the extraction of major produce.

The state's view that forests are too valuable to be left to the

'depredation' of the tribal people, has served to push the Mullukurumbas away from the forests and in fact sandwich them between the forests and non-tribal people. They are pressed in between as a result of, on one side, the state policy of pushing tribal people away from forests and using the forests for commercial and industrial purposes apart from conservation. On the other side are the land grabbing non-tribal people who are covertly supported by the conditions of legal sanctions. Examples include land grants given to non-tribal people by the state, or forced eviction of tribal people from lands on the pretext of settlement of high interest debts owed to money lenders. The outcome is visible in the residential configuration of the Mullukurumbas which is discussed later.

Demarcation of forest boundaries is done in haphazard ways and depends to a large extent on the amount of money tribal people are able to pay the forest officials. It is no accident that while the area of natural forests has decreased rapidly, the area of reserved forests has gone up in the Nilgiris district. While there is no doubt that wastelands are indeed being converted into reserved forests, the area which is made use of, is very often the original forest land. The tribal people are the ones who are pushed out.

Relationships with forest officials is a special case by itself. It results in a source of constant tension. Confusion over the granting of land rights by the revenue authorities and their simultaneous take over by the forest officials is a case in point. It results in Mullukurumbas subjected to claims of illegal ownership by the forest officials. Illegal contributions are forcibly taken from the

Mullukurumbas by the forest officials through the employment of this stratagem. Illegal fees, also known as 'annual contributions' usually calculated according to the number of ploughs and other agricultural implements, are demanded. Failure to pay could lead to charging the 'defaulter' with 'offenses' which one has not committed.

The Mullukurumbas are also made to work under the guise of threats, and any refusal to work would be charged with the offence of having cleared the forest for illegal cultivation. These are some of the past practices that still continue. The dependency of Mullukurumbas on forests has led to their being subjected to the rules laid down by forest officials. Extensive rearrangement of lifestyle has taken place due to resettlement and forced interaction with non-tribal people in a land scarce environment.

### **Land.**

It is not easy to ascertain with any accuracy the extent of land actively controlled and utilised by non-tribal people, especially since not all of them is lawfully owned. This is largely due to the connivance of minor revenue officials in illegal land transactions which make a mockery of the protective legislations to which the government is officially committed to. A visual examination of Gudalur town reveals the undisguised accumulation of wealth by non-tribal people and an unequally blatant poverty of many a tribal settlement. It gives the lie to the official assumption that economic growth, even if set in motion by outside agents must ultimately benefit the tribal population. Distribution of available

land in Nilgiris reflects this gap.

Mullukurumba lands can be classified into (a) private lands and (b) Government assigned lands. Encroachment by outsiders is more in private lands of the Mullukurumbas. Government assigned lands are distributed from revenue or forest department owned wastelands. The Mullukurumbas are provided with conditional 'pattas' or land documents which allow them to cultivate these land. They are not allowed to transfer them to transfer, sell or mortgage the same for a period of ten years from its grant. Crops grown in such lands provide about 37 % of income for the Mullukurumba. Among the Mullukurumbas, around 9% consider themselves as landless, 64 % as marginal farmers, 22 % as small farmers, 6% as medium sized farmers, while none can be considered to be a large land holding farmer. The average size of landholding among the Mullukurumbas is around 2.2 acres of land.

These are scattered land holding, under-utilised when compared to the other non-tribal held fields. It results in relatively high wastage and higher costs of cultivation, stagnation in technological change and a resulting low capital formation. There is little investment in necessary farming operations such as levelling, bunding, irrigating, fencing and so forth which in turn reduces the productivity of the farm land.

Mullukurumbas are most often at a disadvantage in terms of competition and subject to pressures to sell their produce at a low price. In other words, it is actually an uneconomic holding, for the produce from such small holdings of land is (a) inferior in the quality of produce, due to manual processing and (b)

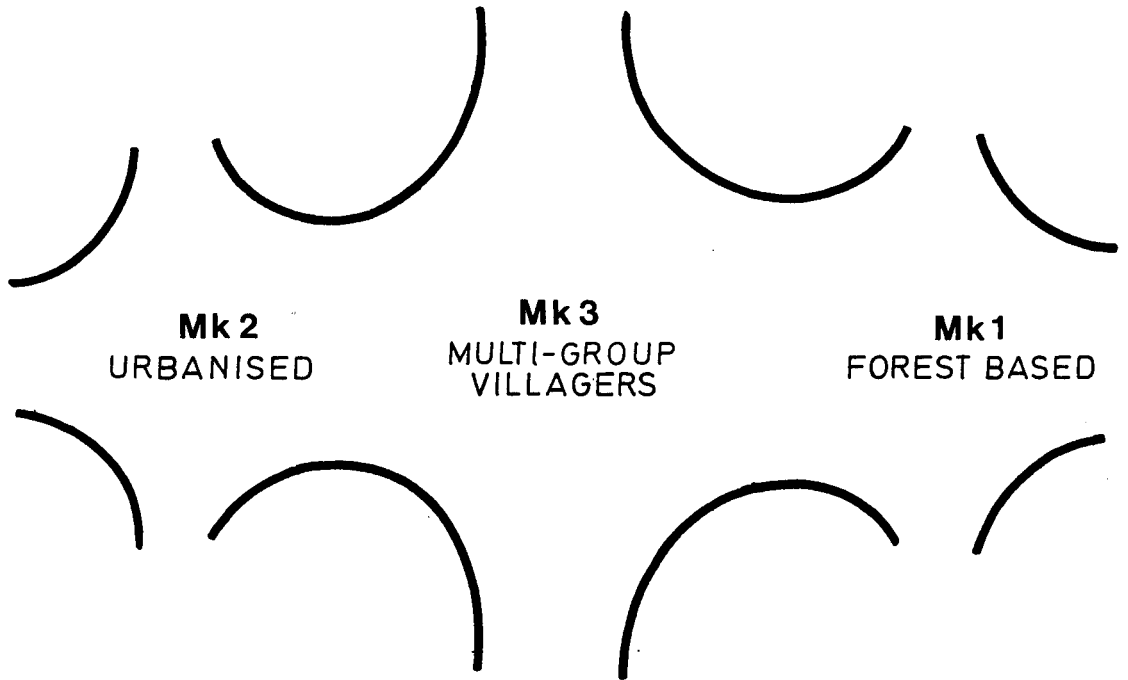
is sold at very low prices due to inability to find a proper market for it. Also, the finance, capital and credit facilities are usually at high rates of interest, resulting in indebtedness. Apart from these factors, the value of land has been on the increase in Nilgiris. The immigrants who acquire land are numerically dominant in the region. They settle in the relatively better agricultural parts and exercise considerable influence in the local area. They establish relations with local officials forming strong links without which ownership of land is not usually very firm.

Apart from a plantation economy, two new systems of land use and labour have developed. These are the commercial exploitation of the forests and the extension of modern methods of cultivation in the more accessible part of the hills. In both these systems, Mullukurumbas either become poor tenants and share croppers working for an outsider-landlord producing crops for the market rather than, as in the past, for their own subsistence. The other alternative is to join the landless, felling trees, cutting bamboo and hauling timber for contractors usually from the plains.

#### **Residential configuration of the Mullukurumbas.**

The parameters of change mentioned so far, have obviously led to pressure being built up, resulting in large scale resettlement of Mullukurumbas. The closely knit community that was sustained on co-operation and allegiance to internal authority, is being given up, resulting in fragmentation of the group. Co-operation between groups and within themselves described by ethnographers

## RE-LOCATION OF THE MULLUKURUMBAS



- Mk 2** Ties break and identity of Mullukurumbas disappears faster here
- Mk 1** Maximum 'tribal' characteristics found here
- Mk 3** - 'Progress' occurs faster here.  
- Sub-elites are conscripted from this group  
- Sanskritisation and Westernisation occurs here

during the past centuries has been replaced by the need to compete both within and with other groups. Allegiance to authority within the community is replaced by individual decisions within smaller groups such as the family, forced upon them by changes outside.

Change has led to three visible sub-groups emerging, in terms of their location. The first sub-group are MK1, Mullukurumbas who are highly mobile and keep moving with the forests, as it were, as its topography varies. Apparently, there seems to be no attempt made by this sub-group to understand outside values. It results in MK1 staying far away in remote settlements. Their income source is highly forest based. It includes illegal gathering of forest produce like fruits, nuts, roots, tubers and also by hunting small forest animals and reptiles. Collecting honey, barks of trees, herbs and leaves as well as cutting bamboo are other sources of income. They also produce rope and fibre products. Many of them work in forest departments as casual labourers. The characteristics of this sub-group is not unique to the Mullukurumbas alone. It is widely reported among contemporary hunting gatherer peoples.<sup>8</sup>

MK1 who get to live off the forests, live in temporary settlements, which are small in size. The more their dependence on forest resources, the less the permanence of these tribal settlements. The size of the settlement, restriction of access to forest resources and the local hierarchy positively affect the length of stay at any particular place.

The second sub-group, the MK2 are also highly mobile, but in this case,

their mobility is fixed to the periphery of the labour market. There is a visible absence of regard for traditional values. It has resulted in giving up one's traditional residences as well as lands. The third sub-group, Mk3, on the other hand, are relatively stationary and it is here that one sees the 'progressive Mullukurumbas'. There is an attempt to understand outsiders values and play along. In terms of production and consumption there is a fundamental difference with MK1 and Mk2. They have bits of both the old and new with them. The MK3 have the maximum opportunity for occupational change and mobility. Part of the reason for this 'progressiveness' can be argued as arising mainly from the maintenance of a line of communication with external localities. Factors among the MK3 that differentiate them from MK1 and MK2 are their greater ability to innovate, to understand communication, participate in and take a lead in opinion leadership.

Nevertheless all three sub-groups MK1, Mk2 and MK3 react against the society, the state and the strong. All of them struggle to maintain a consensus and conflict with the change agents and change agencies. All three attempt to search for a new self identity in different ways. This leads to a search and discovery of a cultural self identity, myth making about the past and building up of organisational strength in the present. While economic conditions fragment the group, politics requires integration. This leads to the articulation of a desire for different identities including autonomy through restructuring the institutions of family and religion. This is the base on which the counter-elites build their Movement in Nilgiris. This is analyzed in the next chapter.



## **Politics.**

If the above parameters have had an effect on the implosion of the Mullukurumbas, externally, it has led the Mullukurumbas to be absorbed into a cash economy which they find extremely difficult to cope with. Participating in systems, other than their own traditional ones which they do not fully comprehend, causes them to feel alienated among themselves and from other groups as well. A peripheral existence or at best a subjugated one has become the lot of most of the Mullukurumbas.

This is the view that emerges from an examination of the political participation of the Mullukurumbas and their representation in structures of local level institutions in Gudalur taluk. Through political activity, they aim to achieve control over resources and access to the use of power over others. The society in Nilgiris is the arena in which groups compete to control one another and to achieve command over property and resources. In Gudalur, this has generally resulted in land and development resources being appropriated on the basis of groups. This is to avoid their being controlled by other groups and to retain such resources they already possess.

Factions emerge with merging of larger groups in Nilgiris and the Government officials connive with vested interests outside the area as well as minor leaders and tribal leaders within. Cohesiveness within the Mullukurumbas and with other groups is not evident in the political sense. What ever the political linkages that arise in the case of Mullukurumbas, it is based on a pan-tribal identity. There is no evidence of linkages with non-tribal groups. Very

often, in their conversation one can perceive their dismay over a sense of belief in mutual obligation being over ridden by competition at the level of local politics. With regard to the freedom to be a participant in democratic politics based on such factors, the small size of the community as well as fragmentation within, determines the distance it can go up the hierarchy of political institutions.

In this study, one considers the arena of block-level politics as the lower end of high politics. Large groups, in terms of numbers as well as size of land holdings dominate by securing representation in these structures of power. The reason is obvious. It is the lowest possible level that contracting can be decided upon by an elected body. Representatives at the village level do not have access to similar distributive resources. It is not often that Mullukurumbas find representation at the Block level panchayat body. If one gets to be a member, his or her voice is stifled by the others. This has been the experience of 'democratic', representative politics for the Mullukurumbas. Evidence of political support, linkage and agendas articulated by the Mullukurumbas is made use of in the next chapter. This particular section merely expresses the limitations of political participation and representation in the structures of local level politics Mullukurumbas experience. Social change, constraints of the economic structure and denial of access to political structures of power to address issues that determine the needs of the group, have a forceful impact on the Mullukurumbas.

### **Mullukurumba and the market economy.**

The market economy in Nilgiris, in its turn, lays down certain conditions on the lives of the Mullukurumbas. One has to agree with David Guillet that,

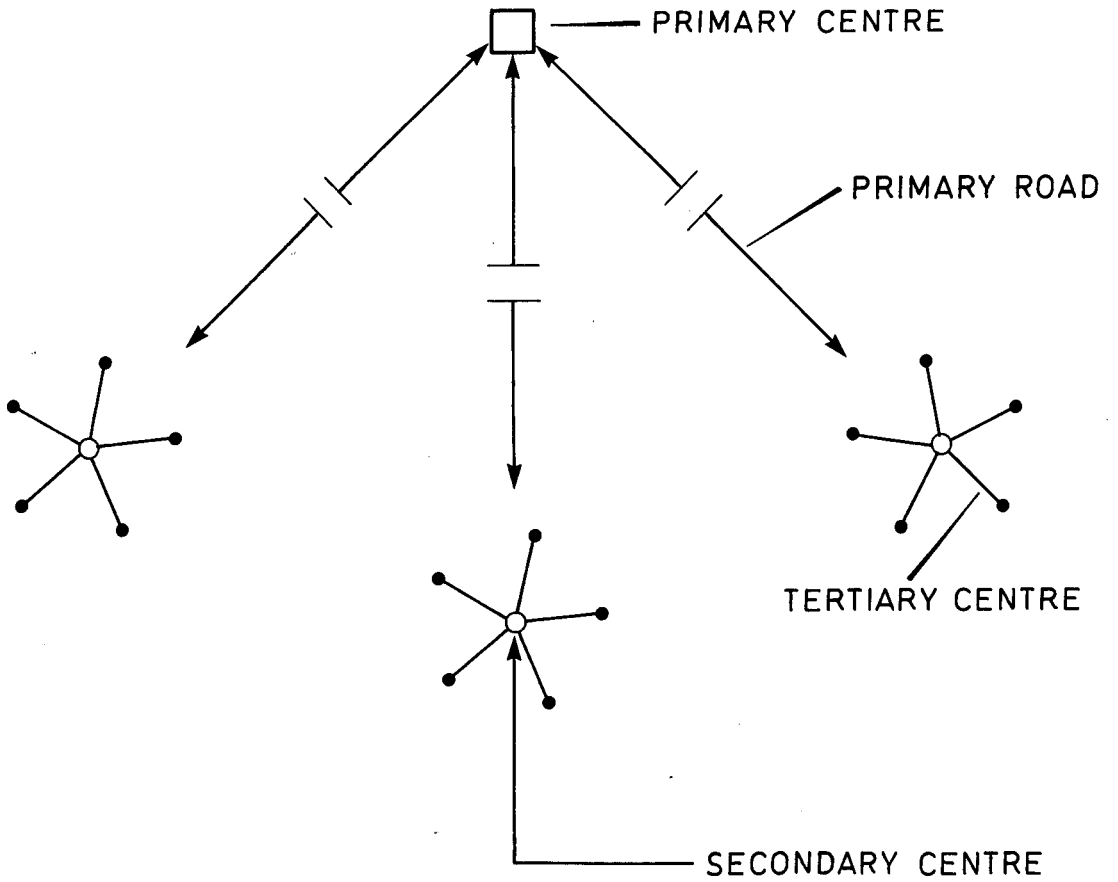
the penetration of market forces has freed their land and labour from their embeddedness in the social fabric of local populations to be bought and sold as commodities.<sup>9</sup>

This is especially true in the case of the Mullukurumbas. However, it has not allowed them to maximise production. With regard to the Mullukurumbas, it has on the other hand, encumbered them through social constraints by exercising control over land as well as labour.

What has resulted is in fact (1) a monopoly control of local market centres and transport facilities by external traders (2) a low degree of Mullukurumba participation in commerce (3) the compulsion on the part of small scale rural producers like the Mullukurumbas to sell for markets outside the region rather for an internal economy and (4) dependency of Mullukurumbas on inputs to the region which come from a nearby more developed economy. In other words, what we have in Nilgiris is the Mullukurumbas stuck at the peripheral end of a dendritic market network.<sup>10</sup>

In terms of selling whatever they produce from their lands, the Mullukurumbas find themselves in a market condition that is determined by external forces that is more developed. While the organisation of horizontal market relationship is competitive, the organisation of vertical relationship is monopolistic. Production is small scale, capital is dispersed, the source of inputs

# DENDRITIC MARKET ORDER



and destination of the output is external. The market pricing system of food and other commodities is

external as well. In other words, land, capital as well as labour are externally determined.

In conclusion, this section reveals that change has been the dominating reality and experience of the Mullukurumbas, more so since independence. Change has been and is taking place both ways. From outwards moving in the direction of creating an impact on the Mullukurumbas, the above mentioned parameters of change have been increasingly constraining their past lifestyles. They can be summarised as follows: A rapidly decreasing percentage of population of the Mullukurumbas against an overwhelming tide of immigration, which is ever increasing. New and more debilitating forms of disease and sickness, which impinges within a frame of mind that considers illness a curse. It makes change related diseases increasingly being interpreted as caused by the 'other.' Imposition of new values as 'education' that does not complement their own felt needs. This leads to Mullukurumbas questioning their authenticity and utility. Also, a low percentage of educated, leads to the widening of the social group. Competing within a surplus labour market that very often leaves them at the insecure end.

Development programmes that transfer far differently in reality from the welfare orientation it portrays in theory. It merely widens the economic gap rather than support integration. A robust cultural life of the newly immigrated non-tribal people and the value placed on such practices, customs and rituals

leads to a perceiving of change as a danger to Mullukurumba identity and life style. Large scale deforestation and new laws forcing greater penalties on its use. Subjected to derive greater income from land, the Mullukurumbas are forced to compete in an unequal economic system. The output from such lands are far less compared to technologically superior cultivation of non-tribal owned lands. Representative democratic politics that is taken over by large groups and the economically better of.

All these factors, though constraining has still not politically decimated the Mullukurumbas. The evidence is produced in the next chapter. The impact cannot be made light of nevertheless. Truly and with regard to the central aim of the study, change has affected the Mullukurumbas psychologically, creating within them an awareness of vulnerability and inferiority. A sense of weakness over rides their every perception of what is happening to them. Much of what is valued is external to the Mullukurumbas. A dichotomous existence has been the bane of contemporary Mullukurumba life. Change and its impact on the Mullukurumbas has led to an identity of the weak.

In this study the Mullukurumbas are seen as actors who evaluate and reflect on their relative standing with others, at times questioning their cultures norms and finding within it adaptive methods to manoeuvre through change. As actors in this study they are seen in this study as representatives, not of small tribal groups per se, but of the weak. This section merely reveals part of the change which apparently seems to have led to the stifling of the Mullukurumbas by external forces. The following section explains how the Mullukurumbas

interpret this perceived change. It shows how the Mullukurumbas, in spite of pressure from outside refuse to give in and instead react. Before this active role of the Mullukurumbas is analyzed, their interpretation of change is explained.

#### **Change and its impact on Mullukurumba psychology.**

Contemporary Nilgiris forces the Mullukurumbas to look elsewhere than their own group for guidance on what sort of person to be and what ends to pursue. The sense of self has become problematic. The search for new models of self-evaluation is on. For Merton,

in the technical vocabulary of reference group theory, social mobility and weakened in-group controls increase the probability that an actor's reference group need not coincide with his or her membership group.<sup>11</sup>

Values and preferences of the Mullukurumbas are changing as a result of comparison with significant others. Intra-group authority structures are being reorganised. The Mullukurumbas are forced to aspire for respectability from the surrounding groups. The boundary between in-group and out-group essential to the localised identity of the Mullukurumbas is constantly being pressurised and changed. For Scott and Popkin, this is not just a moral or a cultural event. At every moment, it is informed by changing relations of power inside and beyond the village. From their perspective, the long trumpeted contest between political and moral accounts of economic change become a false one.<sup>12</sup>

The fundamental change that has taken place is that Mullukurumbas no

longer look to their fellow tribal people for social respect as much as they look to outsiders. They also realise that the respect of individual Mullukurumbas is dependant on society's respect of the group as a whole and vice versa. Change then is not merely a personal adjustment but a need to make a concerted effort of the group itself. In other words, there has arisen the need to simultaneously improve the social position of the group. Mullukurumbas therefore aim to reshape their group by recreating a common motivation towards what are now locally shared valued means or 'goals.' It is here that one sees cultural norms and symbols used by the Mullukurumbas as, not just to survive but far more importantly provide vitality to motivate change.

This individual and group effort at gaining social respect is tagged on to what is valued and rewarded by the society around them. The most visible economic resources required and valued in Nilgiris is money. Money and a steady opportunity of labour is in a sense, more than an economic asset. Also, land in more ways than one is a vital necessity and hence valued as such. In the social sense, the process of hinduisation and westernisation that is taking place in Nilgiris, is evidently valued for the identity of the group that it is supposed to enhance. These valued means are the three most significant factors with which one can calculate the standing of who one is, either as an individual or as a group. Politics and competition for sharing of power is primarily centred, in Nilgiris, around these core valued means.

Having said that, the valued means - land, money and identity - are valued primarily because of their scarcity and hence the difficulty in their acquisition.



Social change and power in Nilgiris are inextricably linked to the above valued means. Not all groups necessarily fulfil the conditions that determine the politics of such a 'social change'. As mentioned earlier, Mullukurumbas are handicapped by their numbers and wealth. They carry the identity of being 'tribal' people apart from other factors and pressures mentioned in the previous section. These handicaps and other imperatives of social change compel the Mullukurumbas to conform to what is being thrust on them from outside making it difficult for them to acquire the valued means. The options are narrowed down to constantly compete with other individuals and groups or find oneself alienated even as the valued means become unavailable for transaction in everyday politics.

These changes impinging on the Mullukurumbas occurs simultaneously to other groups, especially the immigrants. Social change is not fashioned on an orderly basis of live and let live, but one in which amoralism predominates. Rules plus tools plus resources pressurise groups lower down the scale much more than those at the top of the political hierarchy. Change and crisis sometimes become synonymous, especially for groups like the Mullukurumbas. The only alternative then, for Mullukurumbas, is to attempt a 'cost effective' calculative change, for their very survival.

As observed by the historian C.E Black,

tribal societies may be said to meet the problem of change by concentrating their efforts alternatively, on defending the existing conceptions and adapting them to an altered conception. This fundamental choice between inflexibility and adaptation reflects the accumulation of an infinite number of small choices.<sup>13</sup>

Compelled to manage their valued means in ways consonant with the political and economic demands of the surrounding society they reveal their active role. It is based on rationalisation of production, not driven by the abstract logic of the market, but by aspirations to a changed or changing sense of self and other. They see in it the possibility of transforming economic and political conditions and thus drive social change in their favour.

Change and crisis, which in a sense typifies the perception of the Mullukurumbas, results in both an active and defensive form of reaction. The crisis is interpreted as (a) being overwhelmed, (b) feeling excluded and (c) breaking of bonds of attachment especially to land. Crisis thus roots itself deep into the Mullukurumba psyche. It assumes a certain amount of similarity to the conception of reaction to colonisation. It involves having to constantly fight within a framework set by the outsiders. The Mullukurumbas of the present day, in a similar vein to the 'natives' of the past, find that they need to make

major compromises with outer forces of oppression, backed by the powerful ideology of modernity and by an all conquering technology and . . . still struggling to work through that experience . . . forced to cultivate the creative self protection which the victim often shows when faced with an inescapable situation.<sup>14</sup>

The simultaneous need to cope with change and crisis results in the Mullukurumbas having to create for themselves a psychological condition of contradiction. It is revealed in building a facade before the reality, meaning a progressive front hiding a reactionary interior. The need to be ahead with the times and yet, gain the necessary wherewithal to fight that which forces such a

contradiction. The energy that sustains this reaction comes from the very heart of what sustained the group's 'groupness' in the past - its beliefs and institutions. It is as 'culture creating' in its fight against what it perceives as 'culture destroying' forces from outside.

The Mullukurumbas' sense of (a) self respect - ideas of self as superior to others (b) self sufficiency - making do with one's resources and (c) fearlessness - replacement for anxiety about losing what one has, provide the fire for this social change. It decides the degree of dependence on those who have different and more of the same resources.

A fall out of the interaction with the outsiders is a combination of xenophilia and xenophobia. Turned inwards to the group, with every perception of incapacity of their fellow Mullukurumbas, a condemnation takes place. There is a failure to empathise. On the other hand, when ever a fellow Mullukurumba acquires one or more of the valued means, it is talked about in terms of respect and identity for the group. In a way, this social scotoma is a product of (a) a hierarchical, back to back society, in which the higher castes and classes have little feelings for those beneath them as well as (b) a non-attachment, perceived to be a Hindu religious tradition. Also, it is a social phenomena that occurs through the numbing of the desiring faculty of the Mullukurumba. A survival instinct that teaches the folly of thinking beyond tomorrow (time) and hence making the present more bearable by being non-attached.

This can be understood within the frame of a psychology of weakness. Weak identity breeds its own sense of belief and expectation. On the one hand,

what is being taken for granted exceeds what is observed, but on the other, what is observed is wilfully reduced and interpreted in such a way that the world gets arranged in terms that justify one's political behaviour. It arises from a fear that one - in this case the Mullukurumbas - is placed in a position of isolation, a place of vulnerability, a place of worthlessness . . . or a place of vanity, where one's best efforts to acquire valued means will never be taken for what it is.

However this position is not one of apathetic observation of oneself. Its bottom line is certainly not 'it doesn't matter anyway.' For some, there is a tendency to soothe oneself by the belief that 'things will change' and 'it will get better'. But, it does not rest on cliches and hope alone. There is a greater sense of realism within. The Mullukurumbas realise that people, especially the plainmen around them are not really 'angelic' as they appear, that in fact they are 'human' in its worst application. Having taken that standpoint of perception, the Mullukurumbas keep indicating their sense of weakness by reacting to the forces from outside.

In a way it is a tight rope balancing act performed in the mind. A kind of risk taking, where there are set limits of going, so far as to allow oneself as much as one is allowed. When seen in terms of their behaviour in activities of low politics, it is to test the waters - at the terrain of low politics - and getting back. This allows them to take credit for the fact that they had stepped out and 'gave a blow' and not take seriously the act of stepping back again. This perception is enveloped within the institutions of family and religion. They provide the source material for sustaining the identity of weakness that serves

as a base for reaction.

Either way, this dichotomous progressive front before a reactionary interior has important implications in this study. It reflects a far deeper rooting from which the reactive behaviour of the Mullukurumbas come from. It shows that the spontaneous reaction of the weak discussed earlier does not fully comprehend what meets the eye. The desperate acts of the weak, once again discussed earlier as the response of the weak appear simplistic. The identity of weakness, conceals a far more shrewd, sustained, reflexive reaction that questions rigorously change and how they can and cannot manoeuvre. Change fuels this identity of the weak and this identity is used to react to change.

### **Conclusion.**

Having analyzed change affecting the Mullukurumbas within specific parameters, the impact of the same on Mullukurumba psychology was looked into. One sees here how the role of actor and political activity is not confined to the strong alone. The weak do play a part, even though external conditions push down the weak. Instead of exploitation being the final word in this analysis one begins to notice that within the group, the identity of the weak provides the sustenance for their reactions. Importantly, the weak are seen here not as 'desperadoes' but actors who sustain reaction in those spaces that allow them to reap advantageous returns.

The weak it also appears, in a reverse sense, use a facade of a progressive front behind which they have a reactionary interior. Adjustment to social change

is therefore seen here as based on realism. It is in that context that the Mullukurumbas transcend their representation of tribal people and in this study become the representatives of the larger grouping; the weak in Indian society. This chapter provides the basis for the understanding of the weak and how they interact with other protagonists within the political culture of Nilgiris, within the terrain of high and low politics.

**End-notes.**

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## CHAPTER V

### POLITICAL CULTURE AND HIGH POLITICS IN NILGIRIS.

#### **Introduction.**

The objective of this chapter is to portray within the canvas of the region's political culture the interaction of the four protagonists of the study: the state, the society, the strong and the weak. Contemporary political culture in Nilgiris is the outcome of the interaction of the four protagonists. Each one of them take distinctive positions and their interaction has its consequences. To begin with, some characteristics of each of these protagonists are described before the dynamics of the political culture in Nilgiris is analyzed.

The politics of the weak cannot and should not be seen in isolation. The interplay of the forces of state and society is seen here as providing the tautness for the canvas - the political culture of Nilgiris - thus serving as the background for the analysis of the politics of the weak. This chapter in particular and the study as a whole attempts to understand the politics of the weak with this underpinning tension as its base. The justification for the discussion of the state - society conflict therefore is as follows. This study could have been a comparison of the Mullukurumbas with other groups in Nilgiris in their acquisition of valued means. But, this study aims to go further by showing how the weak by focusing attention on these valued means are shifting the outcome of politics as well as the focus of the polity itself. The end point of this study is not how the weak compete with their own kind but what the politics of the weak mean to the

Indian polity. In that sense, discussion of the state and its conflict with society becomes vital.

Very often mainstream studies on Indian politics focus on any one of the above three protagonists, ignoring the weak. This study in order to address this makes use of the perspectives of the subaltern theorists and Scott to provide a general path for analyzing the same. Within the political culture of Nilgiris, it becomes obvious that the terrains used vary. The strong dominate the terrain of high politics so much so that active scope for the weak gets diminished. The objective of this chapter therefore is to analyze the rules underlying the terrain of high politics. 'Sangamam' - a Movement towards pan-tribal autonomy within the region under the direction of counter elites is used to highlight the same.

#### **The state as a protagonist in Nilgiris.**

The state is one institutional order among others - the society being the other. Although the state is empowered to make and enforce collectively binding decisions, its action in this respect are a specific, selective concentration and condensation of struggles within the overall political system and their success depends on conditions and forces beyond its immediate reach. In this sense the success of the state depends on its integration into a historic bloc characterised by a non-necessary, socially constituted and discursively reproduced relative u n i t y . Moreover, although the state is the key site of the illusory community and general will formation, the political imaginary is always selective and inevitably marginalises some wills and interests.<sup>1</sup>

With regard to the specificity of this research, five main characteristics of the state is discussed, before one goes into analyzing the interaction among the protagonists, which is evident in the political culture of Nilgiris. The five main characteristics relevant here, are (1) the neo-orientalist view of the state (2) the developmentalist orientation (3) participation in the economy (4) its democratic nature and finally (5) its role as an umpire in the game of politics. These characteristics are embodied, within the overall perception that the state intends to rearrange society. This could be taken to mean that the state intends to build a 'new society' based on a different set of social divisions. The state in Nilgiris, is analyzed here in this study based on this premise.

**(1) The neo-orientalist view of the state.**

The post-colonial state assumes that society in Nilgiris is inherently in need of change. In that sense, the role of the state is not only as an 'allocator of power' within society, but also through such an allocation, a change agent, constantly attempting to break a past form of social construction and thereby simultaneously creating a new one. This results in the post-colonial state continuing to hold on to a form of view that closely resembles the one pursued by its predecessor. In this chapter, this phenomenon is described as the neo-colonialist nature of the state.

For S.K. Mitra,

Policies leading to social development juxtaposed the values of individual rights, equality and social pluralism against those of a moral community, based on ascriptive authority, communal solidarity and social hierarchy.<sup>2</sup>

This inevitably leads to the state confronting the society in Nilgiris at the level of its roots as it were. In a significant sense, the state forces on the society what ought to be 'moral and immoral'/ 'fair and unfair'. Being the final arbiter, the state by reaching towards that, aims to question the societies past, as well as present principles. In other words, they are being drawn into question. This is not found wholly acceptable by the society. Even if not being completely stalled, the society by a reactionary process - similar to the increasing presence of sand in the grooves of the machine of state - attempts to slow down such a process of deconstruction.

## **(2) The developmentalist state.**

The state secondly is developmentalist. Its view of people as an economic resource that ought to be used to its fullest potential, results in looking beyond the socially masked individual. In that sense, a certain mechanistic perception of its citizenry creates its own potential for rearrangement.

## **(3) The state as the major participant in the economy.**

Thirdly, the state participates as an active catalyst in the economy. For  
Paul R Brass,

the Indian state. . . does not merely respond to crises  
produced by uneven economic development and social change,  
but is itself the leading force . . .<sup>3</sup>

This has led to active domination of the market, both in terms of production as well in terms of manpower. Both these crucial factors are based

on the following premise: the need to spearhead change rather than leave it to a free-market to control the economy. Consideration of resource mobilisation and maximisation entails the need for the state to look at the unique natural conditions, that Nilgiris offers, as an economically viable commodity. A fall out of this is, the people themselves being looked upon as resources. The large export oriented and desperately needed foreign exchange generation potential of, for example, tea, coffee, spices among other things grown in Nilgiris, results in the state being interested and active in the economy of this region. This brings the state, at a day to day level, closer to the other protagonists of this study, the society, the strong and the weak. The state becomes a regulator desiring a far greater degree of conformism from society.

#### **(4) The state and democracy.**

However, looking at the fourth character of the state, its democratic nature, it becomes evident that the earlier three perspectives have been reduced to a partial misnomer. Atul Kohli is forced to ask the puzzling question before he proceeds to interpret India's democracy.

The low level of India's economic development has also been politically consequential for it has been necessary for the state to promote development. For a democratic state, this creates a special problem: how to incorporate diverse interests while simultaneously standing above them to steer and guide economic change ?<sup>4</sup>

At Independence, it was believed by some that the state could and would change society, by developing the people and spearheading a market economy.

Also, the architects of the Indian state had faith in this model to such an extent that they believed this energetic impetus provided by the state would set into motion a self sustaining inertia driving it further, resulting in a rapid attainment of the aims of the state. However, a simultaneous introduction of the democratic experiment has resulted in society being able to have a say in how the state itself ought to function in society.

**(5) The state as an umpire.**

In other words, the final character of the state, its role as an umpire has been taken over by the agents of society. It has resulted, not in a reduction of the state to the level of a non-entity but a blatant use of the state and its legitimacy as an umpire in such a way that it leads to the piloting of the state by the strong, and by that score steering it away from its intended course of restructuring society. Crucially, this leads to past forms of society to continue.

It is these factors that create the tension which provides the tautness to the canvas within which the analysis of the strong and weak in this study arises. It is this antagonism between the state and society that creates a convoluted reshaping of power sharing as a result of which, what is valued becomes peculiar to the region - land, money and identity. In other words, political conflict arising out of social change leads to the emergence of new actors who do not share the basic values of the political system. Not only do new actors emerge, but, the parameters of politics within which transactions take place and legitimised get stretched.

### **The society as a protagonist in Nilgiris.**

What the society aims to do on its part is, to have the final word in the reordering of itself by the state. It is a kind of sleight of hand on the part of the society. It gives the impression that the state is free to change and reorder society and once it receives the input from the state, it takes it over and rearranges the input according to its own format. The above mentioned characteristics of the state is hence distorted by elementary social values. A compromise takes place, where among others, the framework of democratic politics is reshaped to address banal issues of everyday social transactions than the higher issues of transcendental politics. In other words, the society, by its effective participation, pressurises the actors to value transactable commodities, such as, in this case, land, money and identity. These commodities are used as, among other factors, bases of social relations. The focus of politics is thus altered and redirected and priority is given to the transactional rather than the transcendental. In a society forced to change, these serve as standards that suggest permanence.

This leads to identity being an important valued means. From the perspective of the individual in Nilgiris, the social de-recognition of his uniqueness is replaced by a recognition on the basis of a set of identities both modern and hinduised for whatever reasons that maybe. A compromise on the process and substance of change occurs, partly directed by the state and in part socially conditioned. In such a situation how the strong maintain their boundaries from the weak depends on how they can manipulate this confrontation between



the state and society. Identity becomes a valued means that is diligently cultivated, a marker for oneself and one's group for gaining respect within a connective whole and thereby power in what constantly turns out to be an irresolute present of a socially stable past. Land and money are tangible valued means and along with identity become the chips that contemporary politics is fought for.

While the role of the state as a reorganiser of society has provided enough leverage for groups in Nilgiris to 'move', such movements are neither how it is expected by the state nor how the society was organised prior to the inception of the post-colonial state. In this present form of group movement, the rules of wealth and number apply, especially in the need to arrange power favourable to each group in a democratic system. Over a period of time, the strong and weak emerge, conditioned by ever so many factors, but primarily by the state - society confrontation as it takes its particular form in Nilgiris.

### **The strong as a protagonist in Nilgiris.**

Neither homogenous, nor their authority based on co-operation among themselves, power is generated by the partial, yet, substantial control of the state and its resources. This power is integrated with the power holders outside the region, mostly through discrete collaboration and yet, operating blatantly in ways that maintain a status quo favourable to themselves. This is further intertwined with the institutional layering within society. The strong, as defined elsewhere in this study, include the elites. They have the same orientation of the

elites, who Jayant Lele aptly describes as the body of power holders, who

use the state to assert their domination . . . not only  
claim their right to control the economic resources  
of society . . .<sup>5</sup>

The strong have been able to ensconce themselves in the appropriating niches between the state and the society from which they derive their personal power. They, with their vested interests, sail smooth on the pathological phenomena of commercial and constituency politics in the Nilgiris. The strong, derive their strength with the sanction of the state which needs players to articulate and aggregate interests. The strong go further by deliberately excluding the weak from the legitimately recognised channels of power sharing, while performing the function that the state expects from them. S.K.Mitra succinctly describes the role of the local elites, who resemble the strong in Nilgiris, as a

crucial hinge group whose ability (is) to incorporate  
newly emerging social forces into the political arena  
. . .<sup>6</sup> .

However, even as the strong in Nilgiris perform this function, there is no altruism in their actions. Self interest takes the upper hand and the strong entrench themselves in this crucial boundary between the state and society. In Nilgiris, the elites, mentioned in the above quote, become the strong by their willingness to play it both ways. They manipulate both the state and the society and thereby pursue their particular ends. They work on the principle, that 'might' can be used to make enforced prohibitions and by such actions acquire valued means - land, money and identity - making it less accessible for weak groups

such as the Mullukurumbas. In other words, the strong go to the extent of taking over the umpiring of the game of regional politics, albeit partially. As a result the 'price' of participation gets higher and the conditions difficult for some, more than others, to acquire the same. They legitimise their role by giving the false impression that they - the strong - are the dynamic force behind the politics of the region.

Having settled into this vital niche, the strong resist any measure taken to root them out. They manipulate the policy process in such a way that benefits accruing to the weak are curbed. In spite of this, if anything is passed on to the weak which might potentially disturb the status quo, it is vehemently reacted upon. When seen from a perspective of class, the strong become easily identifiable as the landed classes. Another dimension of the strong emerges. Atul Kohli identifies this category of class as a direct result of the 'growth with distribution' philosophy of the state. He sees the state compelled by a condition of characteristics as embodied by the party

the need to be coopted by the landed classes and to facilitate controlled mobilisation of the share-croppers to buttress state power for reform.<sup>7</sup>

In Nilgiris, the second condition is not whole-heartedly pursued. The strong influence the parties as much as the state taking advantage of their reliance on the strong. Constituency politics in Nilgiris then becomes populist politics with programmes for the weak, when in reality, the populist nature of politics is a specific outcome of the condition brought into play by the strong standing in the threshold between the state and society. This results in the blatant growth of the

strong helped by ineffective distribution, in spite of a state and party rhetoric suggesting otherwise. Commercial politics which resembles constituency politics in this regard is no exception either.

When seen in the light of an example, where the weak stand becomes obvious. For example, take the case of agricultural inputs. The strong organise conditions in a such a way that the base is highly unfavourable to the weak. It becomes no surprise then, that say in the case of spread of 'High yielding varieties', it is simply not easy to take any advantage of it, by the marginal farmers, in this case, the Mullukurumbas. Many reasons were given by the Mullukurumbas to substantiate this. As a result any continuation of the same leads to widening of the gap.

When the state alters inputs, aiming to reach the marginal farmers, very often the weak, for example by the introduction of 'intermediate technology', suitable to their specific needs, it creates a panic among the strong who have a vested interest in such a disparity. However, these conditions, though an outcome of a deliberate manipulation by the strong, is seen by the weak, as thrust upon them by a concerted effort of the state, society and the strong. It leads to the realisation of their identity as the weak and the need to react in those terms. In the final analysis, these above mentioned conditions lead to a certain amount of incongruence in the theory and practice of the state.

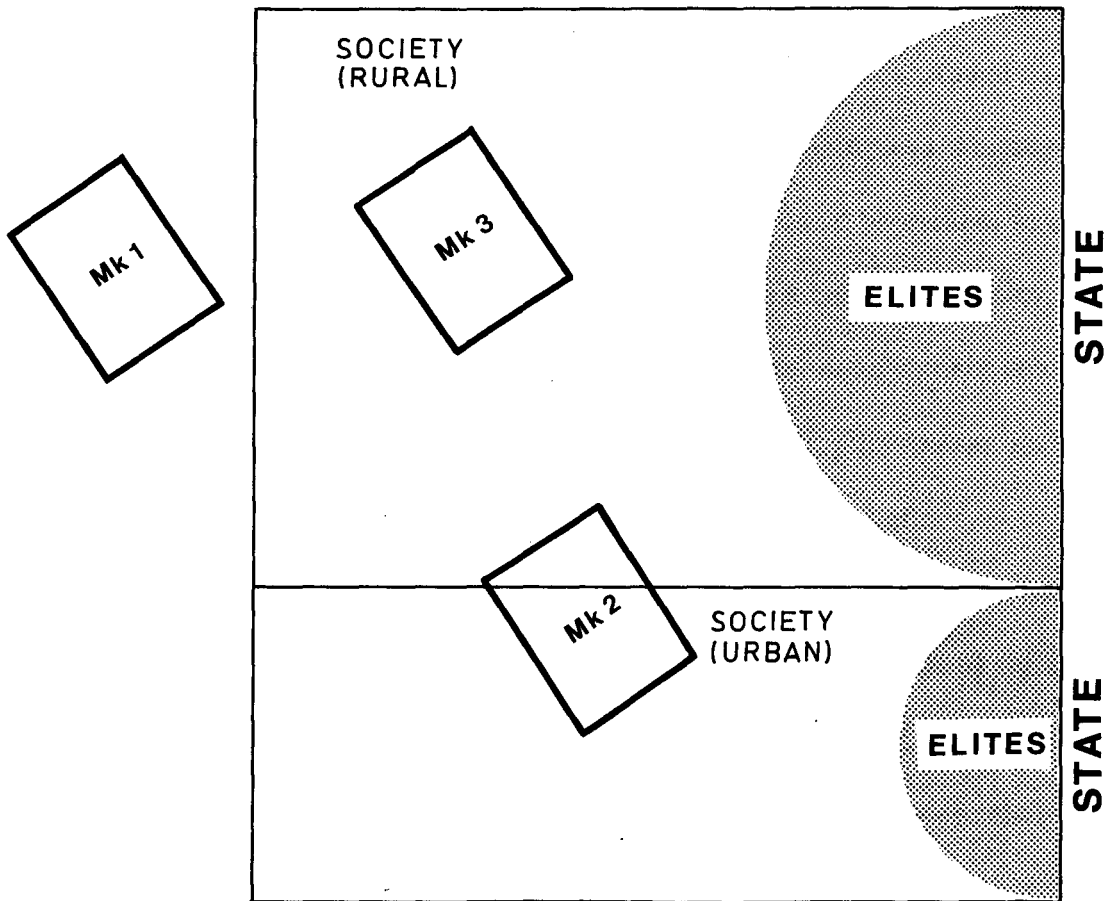
#### **The weak as a protagonist.**

To begin with, the reasons for the weak to be seen as such are both

structural and functional. Not only are they weak due to economic conditions, they are also weak due to the conditions laid down by the rules of politics. They are effectively stalled from accruing benefits for themselves by ineffective participation in the same. Not only is this an economic, social and political reality, but it also is transformed into an attitude in the psychological sense. This does not suggest a ( as mentioned in the earlier chapter) giving up, but reacting effectively by other means. In the case of the Mullukurumbas, being weak, they find the state two steps away, hidden behind the strong and the society all three of which they need to interact with, in terms of a complex set of rules that are apparently loaded against them.

Simply stated, the society as mentioned earlier, attempts to stall unfavourable change which results in power sharing being reshaped on the basis of certain valued means. The strong who settle in this crucial boundary between the state and society have a contorted view towards the weak. On the one hand, they speak of the need for weak to be strengthened, but on the other, do not wish to see in the weak, a source of competition. This condition results in the weak being pushed from gaining a foothold in the arena of high politics, forcing them as a consequence to look for another terrain to regain lost space. The interaction among these four protagonists takes place within a political culture that has its own dynamics. The rules of competition are revealed when one analyses the same.

**THE MULLUKURUMBAS IN RELATION TO  
THE STATE, SOCIETY AND ELITES**



### **The Political Culture of Nilgiris: The non-evolution of master codes.**

The democratisation of Nilgiris after Independence, as other regions in the country was tied up with a deep emphasis on development of the under privileged. While this sprang from an ethos rooted in socialism, there was no effort made on the part of the state to curb capitalist practices. Added to this, was the hope that the emerging political community would be a singular one where the plural identities and affiliations of the past would be denied. In other words, all the past identities would be subsumed under a common identity, 'the Indian citizen'. In real terms, the socialist concept of development and the political concept of unity was expected not only to simplify power under a common structure but also make power accessible to one and all.

This universal and equalised point, it was assumed, would be arrived at partly by a deliberate sacrifice of one's past to the mythical goddess of the state and partly by forgetting through social amnesia. This however turned out to be not so easy in practice and further, in fact, has become more and more obviously a false presumption. With reference to this study, the some groups in Nilgiris with its own regional culture, like the other regions, have used the political arena to rearrange society based on ones past and find a respectable identity for ones group. In other words, the structure has been made use of to perform functions far removed from what was expected of it.

This behaviour reflects two conditions. (1) It reflects the inherent differences in the perception of the state and society as to what democracy ought to mean. (2) It also reflects a certain amount of unsettled argument, as

seen in the contemporary political culture of Nilgiris, on how power ought to be shared. It is here that Satish Saberwal's concept of 'master codes' needs to be looked at. He sees in the argument reflected in the political culture all over India, of which Nilgiris is but a part, a process towards 'legitimation' of master codes. For him

'while Europe could devise . . . master codes, Indian traditions have not commonly promulgated unifying master codes of this sort to deal with its own diversity.'<sup>8</sup>.

This legitimisation process is the deliberate intention of the people themselves. It lies in a deep yearning of the people for something different from the kind of society they have been made to conform in the past. Yet, they have not been able to conclusively work out a perfect alternative. It has been a flirtation of a particular kind at best. In Nilgiris, there is a reluctance to go for a change that calls for greater independence and individuality due to a terrible sobering down caused by a fear of the new. At this juncture, the struggle to legitimise master codes has created a tendency for some, to expect the catalysis of change to emerge from outside of ones immediate community.

The post-colonial state in India has, by implanting a structure, set in process, within an environment whose codes do not complement it, a monopoly of the structures of power by some over others. As a result, the evolution of 'master codes' similar to those in Europe is prominently absent, failing to emerge in parallel forms. Going further, the consequence of this is, not only the state finding itself antagonistic to the society in Nilgiris but the strong increasingly



spreading themselves on the state and thereby curbing its efforts to impose codes on the society. The strong, by making use of the vacuum generated by this stalemate, create a few more codes of their own that allow themselves to take further advantage by fitting these codes within. By filling these 'social blanks' the strong are able to get away without any accountability to society as well as leave no scope for imposition of penalties by the state. All these go together to determine the weak and the strong in present day society in Nilgiris.

#### **Liminalisation of the state and the hold of parallel laws.**

Looking at the state - society conflict in Nilgiris one finds that it is the state which is perceived by society to be, by far, its biggest and most formidable 'enemy'. The state is seen as alien, its programmes and policies for social change as detrimental to the increasingly vulnerable traditional status quo between its constituent social groups. For example, in the case of education. In the Government High school at Erumad, in 1988, Badaga school children were not allowed to attend school by their parents. They considered it as sacrilegious the appointment of a Paniya tribal as a school teacher. So also has been the case of appointments of health and other village level workers from groups which society in Nilgiris considers as low. Introduction of methods and personnel as in the above examples, are seen by the society as evidences of an alien state destructive in intent of traditional social values and practices.

What the society appears to expect from the state is not inculcation of moral behaviour, nor remaking of identities or for that matter, legitimisation of

master codes. Instead, it expects the state to adapt to and legitimise the variegated identities that it - the society - makes in the region. The antagonistic position taken by both the state and society results in, very specially at the peripheral reaches of the state, an overpowering of it by the society. The society bottles up the state and channelises the intention of the state - restructuring social realities - into a position of self convenience. The state, aided by the self interest of the strong finds itself forced to conform to the social realities created by the society.

What can be concluded as the result of this impasse is a veritable personification of the Biblical verse, 'Except the seed fall into the ground and die, it will not be a tree, bearing fruit'. However here, the allegory of the seed and the ground is reversed. The seed is the society and the ground is the state. In other words, except the Indian society die to its vision of itself, which it holds on to desperately, the vision of the Indian state cannot be a reality. For those state officials one talked to in Nilgiris, this was a recurrent theme: the need to restructure and change society. They saw society as an entity stubborn and unwilling to change. For some, force had to be exerted on the society, to make it conform to the values of the state. Alternatively, they saw the invalidity of a stalemated conflict between the state and the society. For V. Subramaniam, a school teacher working at the Residential school for tribal children in Kalichal, this state directed social change, of which he saw himself as an agent, was a 'mission'.

One variation of this is what we see in Nilgiris; a destruction of both the

state and society, one by the other. An exponential retardation, of both the state and society's capacity to overtake one another, takes place. It is a conflict almost pyrrhic in its outcome. In the process, what we see is a curtailment of both the state and society from the ends they pursue or a stagnation at best. This creates an illusion of both the state and society existing at the same time while effective sharing of power is taken over by the strong. The strong strengthen themselves through networks outside the region and thereby create a powerful base in the niches in the power structure.

The fall out of this is a political culture in Nilgiris that spawns corruption, forced illiteracy, population explosion in the form of immigration, violence, communalism among others that neither the state or society can grapple with by themselves but which the state and society's incompatibility is to blame. What we see then is a state and society that reaches agreement sporadically on issues that both consider mutually vital, but otherwise, the society and the state constantly blunt each other making the political culture appear, as an understatement, questionable in terms of legitimacy.

Could one then suggest that statehood as seen in India is something suited only to societies having master codes and not to Nilgiris? No. Instead, what is meant is that statehood faces its own peculiar hurdles in all other societies, hurdles created by the specific nature of each society. In Nilgiris, the struggle between state and society is manifested in this particular form. When the values of the state and society come into conflict at the rural end of India, in a place like Nilgiris, the conflict assumes this peculiar form. This is obvious when one

observes trivial day to day occurrences as well as larger life shaking happenings. What should be of interest to this study is that some of the core values enshrined in the constitution come up against opposition from the traditional values of the society in Nilgiris.

While the state talks of modernity, rule of law, equality, positive discrimination, tribal development and so forth, the society talks of tradition, custom, hierarchy, accommodation and incorporation at the peripheral niches respectively. In other words, here are some examples of values of the state being antithetical to the core values of the society. Hence the substantial rearrangement that is expected as the inevitable fall out, takes a different turn resulting in the state encountering a recalcitrant society in Nilgiris. However, this is not altogether straight forward as one can imagine. The emphasis on self-perpetuation on its part while at the same time recognising within itself the 'lack of an authoritative centre'<sup>9</sup> leads to the society accommodating the state partly by (a) creating social customs and laws, a shaking of which creates a back lash and partly by (b) encircling the state and making it liminal at the edges.

The most visible example of such social customs and laws is the social organisation on the basis of well-defined groups. It is a form of self-creation of identities vital to ones social presence. This self creation of identity of ones group is in itself a 'democratic freedom' allowed by the society. The crucial outcome of this is that on the one hand, society allows freedom for individuals to rearrange themselves as 'collectivities' or groups and on the other hand, takes away from the state its vision of democracy by redirecting the energies of the

individuals to society-directed ends. By that is meant, erecting parallel laws to which 'obedience' is important as much as to statutory laws. It is on such constructions that the political culture in Nilgiris stands on.

With regard to the encircling of the state, making it liminal at the edges, society colludes with the strong who emerge from this condition and simultaneously stand at the threshold between the state and society. These 'gatekeepers' described in more detail later in the chapter, soften up the state, and vitally for the society convert what seems to be unfavourable forms of policy into acceptable practices. The result usually is an ever widening distancing of the state from the weak. Examples of such 'liminality' abound in the Nilgiris.

One evidence of this is the struggle for the Mullukurumbas to reclaim lands that have been taken over by the non-tribal people aided by the strong, One came across Mullukurumbas in the village of Cherangode where land has been persistently taken over by the outsiders who immigrate into the erstwhile tribal areas. The plainsmen who take over most of the land, forcibly or otherwise, as repayment of debts, have pushed out a substantial number of Mullukurumbas as indeed other tribal people. In November 1991, led by local voluntary organisations as well as the communist party along with other tribal associations, over 5000 tribal people assembled in Ootacamund. They marched to the office of the District Collector and submitted a petition for the reclaiming of these lands taken over by the non-tribal people. It is interesting to note that the state instead of fighting for the Mullukurumbas against the non-tribal people only promised to provide houses for tribal people at an alternate site.

One social activist resident in Gudalur, N. Mahendran saw this as a result of a, as he put it, 'hand in glove' nexus between the strong, the state and society. He said that handing over petitions to the Collector is 'merely a formality. No good comes out of it. It is one for the record. The Collector will not dare to push the non-tribal people out.' The state, here at the peripheral regions in Nilgiris, is effectively 'liminalised' in its attempt to confront the social forces and ends up having to readjust itself to a society engineered reality.

This is primarily due to a sleight of hand, on the part of society, that gives one the impression of the state being free to change and reorder society. But, once the society receives the input from the state it takes it over and rearranges it according to its own format. Going further, what we see in the interregnum to this state - society conflict is a self-interested strong who are more often pro-society than pro-state. It is they who play the vital role of 'gatekeepers'. The strong in turn, work on the principle that both the state and society by manipulation can be drawn away from dominating them and within the spaces created, rules favourable to oneself in ones region can be created.

This interregnum and the scope for the strong to fit in their own choices is analogous to an observation made during bus journeys in Nilgiris. The bus drivers and conductors work differently from the way their counterparts work in the bigger cities. For example, there is no specific time for the arrival or departure of the vehicles. One notices that for some passengers paying of fares is not a requisite. Though there are specified bus stops on the way, some can get down or board the bus, almost anywhere on the route. The choice for the drivers

and the conductors to decide on questions, of how and when of their work independent of rules and regulations laid down by the authorities, is conspicuous.

Behind this difference, one notices the organisation of bus services in such a way as to smother competition within. What we see is a bus owners cartel. The road transport system, the public sector state transport buses included, have thrown 'statutory laws' to the wind. Here again is a collusion of the strong and the society to make the state liminal at the periphery. Liminality referring here to a state of flux where authority is fluid and ill defined structurally. Similar observations can be made elsewhere in Nilgiris on how the strong use the state to over ride the society.

#### **The interregnum between the state and society.**

Looking at the interregnum between the state and the society, one also observes the scope for the strong to fit their own choices, not just bus services, to most resources, including the core valued means - land, labour and identity. This vital interregnum is where the strong congregate and where they derive their strength from. The political culture has its sustenance here. In this interregnum, the strong perform the vital role of being a buffer between the state with its programmes and policies aimed at social change and society's resistance to it. In other words, both the state and society, with their differing visions of change, due to their mutual stand off positions, seldom step past the 'no mans land' of the strong, leaving vital 'sectors' of politics in their hands. The 'social blanks' which are thus left conclusively unaddressed due to mutual

inacceptability gives scope for the strong to create a 'market' for themselves, that seem to float on the surface like the scum on the surface of the sea. It ebbs and flows gently between the two conflicting surfaces. This stand-off between the state and society is broken only when the entire scene gets hotter beyond a particular point. This is usually visible when competition among the strong results in the state being called in to set things 'right'.

One such example is the issue of bonded labour of the Paniyas - a tribal group in Nilgiris - which came into the national limelight a few years ago. This does not mean that bonded labour is a recently evolved phenomena in Nilgiris. In an economy where one finds surplus of labour, 'bondedness' to a planter or a labour contractor is very often the only option available to tribal people. However this socially recognised phenomena became an issue not due to a sudden change of mind of the society but due to certain rules being over ridden by a few strong. The resultant controversy and its spillage into the domain of the state and society results in the state 'entering' society to sort things out. The state does indeed act at moments like this but not so much as to solve the issue as much as to highlight that it is a politically active protagonist. Otherwise, the threshold between the state and society is carefully maintained.

This stand-off between the state and society is not only advantageous to the strong but also to the weak. Here is another example from what is colourfully obvious from the streets of Nilgiris' most populous town Ootacamund. It is remarkable how petty hawkers sell their wares. One sells handkerchiefs neatly folded inside an upturned umbrella, another with pens stuck all over ones



shirt, a third with wrist watches inside an open briefcase, a fourth, slippers on plastic sheets spread on the side walk . . . . As soon as one of them spots a policeman, they fold up the umbrella, the brief case and the plastic sheet and quietly slip away into a side road to emerge once again after the policeman walks away. It is a microcosmic reflection of a macrocosmic conflict between the state - personified here by the policeman - and the society - personified by these petty hawkers - confronting each other. It takes place in an ebb and flow manner leaving an inevitable gap in between, where neither is willing to enter into a conflict. If they, the representatives of the state and society do, the first to get in and settle the 'argument' would be the strong.

#### **The vital contradiction embedded in the political culture in Nilgiris.**

If part of the blame for the incongruous positioning between the state and society and the resultant curtailment of their respective capacities can be placed on the strong, part of the blame can be traced back to (1) the absence of codes as well as (2) the absence of determination by the people to choose once and for all what these codes should be. Transporting this analysis to the deeper ideological level one notices the Indian state claiming equality of individuals and collectivities. The society on the other hand presumes inequality of individuals and inequality of collectivities. The state believes in overcoming this inequality by a single minded pursuit of individualism. The important point to note is that there is a disjunction between equality and individualism. The Indian state trips on two level here; imagining that it can balance equality of individuals and

equality of collectivities. It takes place (1) by providing benefit in the form of protective discrimination, favourable to collectivities such as the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes and (2) through inculcating a pursuit of individualism thereby overcoming inequality. Since the last word in defining equality is society specific, it leaves the common man with an unending dilemma and by that very argument, scope to push back the need to decide by finding ever so many reasons for not doing so.

Once again this duality is resolved by compromise between the state and the society. While the state aims to pursue the idea of 'individuality', the society partially retrieves its chestnuts of collectivity by skipping over the determination of what ought to be 'equality'. This leaves scope for anyone to have half of one and rest of the other, leading eventually to a 'society specified inequality'. At the day to day level of interaction, equality is ignored and what is left behind is an individual with an individuality that stands de-recognised in a social idiom. This is because the motivating dimension for individualism as defined by the state is equality and when denied equality by the society what is left is a vacuum of legitimisation which has to be restored by some other or in some place.

For Andre Beteille who claims that equality of individuals and of collectivities are far from nicely balanced in the Constitution of India, the argument supporting the same is drawn from Simmel who saw quite clearly that individualism might lead to either an appreciation of human equality or a preoccupation with the inequality of man. The suggestion made here is that Simmel distinguished between what he called 'individualism of equality' and

'individualism of inequality'.<sup>10</sup>

It becomes exceedingly difficult for an individual in such a political culture as Nilgiris who is denied equality, not to disbelieve it. It is a phenomenon of duality that is presented; state's values versus society's values and equality versus inequality respectively. The contradiction, of being 'in' society and not 'of' it, is too enormous an idea to digest. This contradiction arises from the conflict between state and society and the inability of the state to stall society from continuing with its own perception and vice versa. In the final analysis, for the individuals in such a society, there is a huge niche to manipulate. The reason being the inability of the state to draw the citizens/individuals to perform rights and duties laid down by itself, while the society, on its part, is unable to maintain an order of restraint and thereby draw the obligation of the individuals to itself. What happens then is a conditional free for all; the carving of a niche that is not formally articulated, but, as such does not go away and hence persists. In Nilgiris, though barely apparent, it is yet very real. While some wait for the final argument to end, the ones who effectively use this niche are the strong. They end up controlling the legitimate institutions of authority both in the spheres of state and society inasmuch as they penetrate each other. This is done by synthesising legitimacy through myths and at a different level preventing this stalemate engendered reality from disintegrating.

This forms part of the existing political culture, where many have 'illegitimate individuality' beneath which there is at best a reluctant unanimity, and at its worst, a disagreement on equality that simmers just below the surface.

Gail Omvedt's observation of landholding in rural Maharashtra aptly reflects this corresponding facet of political culture in Nilgiris. In the case of, for example, a valued means such as land,

some underestimate their landholding, some even . . . underestimate their crop productivity often by laughable amounts, they do not mention land they own in other villages and they do not mention Government owned waste land that they maybe illegally cultivating or land taken on lease or mortgage which is not recorded'.<sup>11</sup>

The presence of this in Nilgiris is merely a substantiation of this cultural difficulty of expression in claiming ones individuality on the arena of equality. It is usually assumed that some are 'rich' and some are 'poor'. ( Rich and poor at a simplistic level can be taken to mean the strong and the weak). However this political culture has at its base an unfinished argument as it were. The strong wait for the finality of this argument between the state and society to emerge while simultaneously consolidating one's individualism as it is being buttressed by the economic security of ones assets.

If one is strong, then, instead of trying to legitimise ones individuality and sense of scale in terms of equality/inequality, through vocalisation of self, they settle themselves in the niche between state and society. By taking such a pragmatic position the strong find immediate security. The weak are not allowed to be there. Though there is no evidence of a complete congruence between status, power and wealth in Nilgiris, in the context of the political culture in Nilgiris, the Mullukurumbas are forced to believe in and compete in such imagined terms. The unresolved social blanks and the effective manipulation of

the strong lead to the weak seeing status, power and wealth as determinants of one's ability to perform any significant social role.

### **The scenario of political culture in Nilgiris.**

Concluding this analysis of the state - society conflict, what we see in Nilgiris is a reflexive or captured state as well as a society that appears to be rapidly losing its hold on the ability to restrain or enforce obligation from its constituent individuals. When contrasted with an autonomous state, power appears to have shifted into the hands of the strong. What we find in terms of political culture is an 'illegitimate individuality' or a 'de-recognised equality'. The state is co-opted by the strong while the society rapidly lacks the ability to control individual members.

When one combines the conditions described above with the fact that the state is a 'resource and distributor of resources on the one hand and a promoter of values on the other,'<sup>12</sup> one can imagine the gold mine available for the strong. Consequently, the state is no longer simply an agency pursuing equality or distributive justice. One has to agree with Paul R. Brass that

the state and its policies become a source of potential benefit for some groups and communities and also a threat to others, particularly to local elites and communities and to groups whose values differ from those of the secular, modernising, industrialising state.<sup>13</sup>

However, where one ought to disagree with Paul R Brass is about the point regarding elites being threatened by the state. Though the state is pitted against

the elites in society, in this case, the strong in Nilgiris, it is the strong who have found a niche between the state and society and by doing so, have a finger, along with the state, on the trigger, against the weak. Apparently this looks as if the state is in control but the reality is different. The theoretically 'isolated' state in reality becomes conditioned by the need to seep through the layer of the strong to have an impact on the society in Nilgiris.

The strong, who hijack the state, do so on the basis of a self interested notion that it offers better access to valued means and by holding on to it they can consolidate the same. Seen from this perspective, access to crucial points in the structure convert policy that means one thing, to mean something else in practice.

For example, in Nilgiris this results in plantations taking precedence over forests. Forests, for the state and strong, mean two different things. For the state, from an ecological point of view, there is a need to have 33% of the country under forest cover. This forest policy translated in terms of the ecology of Nilgiris requires conservation of rapidly depleting forest cover. For the strong, there is a desperation to hold on to cultivable land primarily to stay ahead of pressure created by a burgeoning population. In other words, the strong place greater value on cultivable land than on forests. This results in a certain indiscriminate destruction of forests and conversion of the same to arable lands.

What is significant here is that it is done through the agency of the state and legitimised by a dubious philosophy of development. What we have then is, for example, an increase in the area of plantations and a simultaneous reduction

of forest area that was the erstwhile 'living space' of the Mullukurumbas, as other weak tribal groups in Nilgiris. Land alienation, displacement, eviction, problems with forest officials, atrocities on tribal people, loss of land rights, denial of access to forest produce are some of the consequences.

The state, on its part, finds itself retreating in the angle of tribal development to justify its concern for the deprived tribal people but the gap between what is professed in policy and carried out in practice is wide. The strong not only fit themselves within the appropriating niches that separate the state and the weak, they also attempt to remove from serious debate in politics, issues of economic equality, social justice and human dignity, thereby creating an improper framework of power sharing in the politics of the region. Politics then is a game for high political stakes for the strong, behind the facade of 'populism' which makes the state appear 'weak-friendly'.

The logic behind this 'populism' which makes the state appear 'weak friendly' is the realisation of the strong on their dependency on the institutions of the state. Without the state, the legitimacy of one's role is taken away from the strong. In a reverse sense, the strong generate a view, among the weak, of a state that is interested in their welfare. It is a ploy to manipulate the 'good faith' of the weak under the guise of genuine use of authority of the state. Beneath this superficiality however is the true nature of the strong, who in tandem with society do not allow the state to venture beyond 'window dressing'. In other words, the state is curbed from grappling with those conditions that keep the weak behind the strong and the society.

### **The consequences for the Mullukurumbas.**

The same example is used to develop the argument further. In Nilgiris, the strong though appearing to speak for the state, justify the need for forests to be 'used' in ways that are largely detrimental to the interests of the tribal people. In the classical mode of turning the rationale around, any attempt by the Mullukurumbas to use forests only justifies further legitimisation by the strong. Representatives of this group which includes local politicians, plantation owners, higher forest officials among others, with whom one spoke, say that this 'use' of the forests by the weak is that which needs to be feared, and thus the need to go deeper down the line in controlling and legislating on it. This perspective is not only rapidly gaining ground but, they, the strong, have been able to convincingly keep calling the shots. The tribal people, the Mullukurumbas are seen as 'evil' by the above and considered as 'irresponsible' and 'rampant destroyers of valuable forest land'. The Mullukurumbas get tied up by this language of description. Not doing what was described means flunking out, while doing what is described is a confirmation of the 'evil' nature described earlier. It ends up as a neat bottling up of the weak to strengthen further the self interested ends of the strong. Very soon the strong have laid down the ground rules of what 'weak' behaviour should be vis-a-vis the forests. When the Mullukurumbas give up their 'wayward ways' they end up at the feet of the strong who indeed have the 'recipe for success' in the form of 'development', to hand out.

It involves joining a network where once again it is a well orchestrated



sequence of agencies who would carve out their piece of flesh. What the Mullukurumbas end up with in such a political culture is a curbed weak, with no rights that will earn sufficient returns in high politics. For example, this is seen in an altogether different but equally significant arena of tribal life; cooperative societies. Let us take the role of one tribal co-operative society in Nilgiris. The Hill Co-operative Marketing Society at Masinagudi in Gudalur is meant exclusively for the Kurumba and Irula tribal people. It has a membership of over 350. For the secretary of the society, their effort at 'interest articulation' in the context of agriculture needs of its members results in their encountering a concerted effort from the entrenched strong to curb its growth and its ability to compete. It results in the co-operative society being forced to focus only in those areas where the bigger co-operatives of the strong do not find in it a source of competition. In the words of the secretary of the society, 'the hill tribes co-operative marketing society faces hikes in levy on the produce as a result of which payment of taxes and wages become a difficult exercise. This leads to a very low margin of profit or none at all and the need to conform to the dictates of the strong in order to survive.

In a larger sense, the strong have become the 'Brahmins' of the political world, the recipes they bless and hand out are the 'Prasadams'; the holy manna. The political culture of the region becomes sanctified through a psychological hegemony of the strong that the weak Mullukurumbas are forced to believe in. There is no two ways to living, there is just one superior way; the strong led way. It is a philosophy that grows by sheer force and constant repetition, gradually

growing in the psyche of the weak. It is this overstretching of the rules that (1) give no scope for the weak Mullukurumbas in high politics and (2) results in disagreement among the pushed out - the weak - on how and what to play for. Apart from this, the strong undermine any political organisation that can provide an institutionalised base for the weak.

By overstretching of the rules, what is meant here is (1) the strong taking over the control rules of the state and thus becoming an umpire while playing the game and (2) commercialisation of politics and politicisation of commerce that pushes the weak 'out' of the arena of high politics. It is in fact one of the handicaps of the tribal people in Nilgiris, that persists, in spite of the philosophy of the state to give them special privileges in the form of protective discrimination, to even out the disadvantages. A 'hijacked' state in the reversed category of not being allowed to be an umpire and act true to its word is what one finds in Nilgiris.

Among the rules in which the weak Mullukurumbas stumble is the tendency to look at personalisation of power - through acquisition of valued means of land, money and identity - spatially and in - commercial and constituency politics - temporally local terms. It is not unfair then, to suggest that there is a 'means test' for participation in high politics and in that sense the Mullukurumbas suffer a disadvantage, apart from the 'size test'. The question then is, is it unfair politics that the Mullukurumbas find themselves exposed to? This need to personalise power obviously leads to control of structures that enhance the capacity of the strong to acquire valued means. Each structure that

is controlled has a knock-on effect. Surely the Mullukurumbas think so.

### **The strong unmasked.**

There is a nexus between local elites, party bosses and bureaucratic functionaries who attempt to share among themselves the resources of the state. In Nilgiris, these elites invest the money in buying lands both within the local area as well as outside. Also, money is reinvested in land, money and identity building ventures that is rooted in one's group. Once they acquire strength, they then attempt to 're-feudalise' the society in terms of patron - client relationships with the weak. High politics in Nilgiris then becomes split into two different exercises. On the surface it appears in Nilgiris to be a populist form of politics where a charismatic leader at the top - as evident in the personality of the past and present Chief Ministers in Tamilnadu - is able to change society. The promise of working towards such a change is sustained while in reality a cumulative strong use that image to practice a different form of politics; a patron - clientage at the rural end in Nilgiris. It is this duality, among other factors, that results in an inability of the weak, to use democratic norms of high politics so as to obtain a return that is neither what the state expects in theory to happen, nor the weak expect in reality.

The coalescing of the political, economic and social forces leads to a political culture taking the form of a combination of democratic legitimisation, social respectability and free play of economic forces for the strong. This becomes the prize of high politics in Nilgiris. High politics becomes an arena

exclusively for some groups, where the strong are able to fit themselves in the niches between the state and society and derive their social identification within it. Groups like the Mullukurumbas are handicapped either by numbers, by wealth, or both and by an increasing pressure from the rapid ossification of the strong on the state. They are discouraged from using any legitimate means of enhancing power. For example, the growth of education among the Mullukurumbas is curbed, for it is seen to encourage the ability to question the authority and power of the strong.

Once exposed to the freedom to manipulate, the strong consolidate. For example, with regard to land, land records in Nilgiris are by and large not kept up-to-date. This kind of haphazard recording of data is actually 'good' for the strong due to several reasons, one of which being the allowance for confusion it provides. It helps in delaying action to bring to book their culpability. It also enables the strong to hold land over the statutory 'ceiling limit' through ingenious means. The strong force the weak to 'sell' their land for a low price or to sign up as having acquired land provided by Government while in reality they are appropriated by the strong themselves. Assets like tractors, animals and loans are got by the strong in the name of the weak. This rampant activity finds as many avenues as possible for its consolidation, even to the extent of manipulation of records and accounts, the number of labourers employed by them each day, expenditure incurred in cultivation, return through crops . . . all of which short-change the weak.

More mundane examples include procuring of milk at a lower price and

selling it a higher price, stealing of crops at night, cutting down and selling of trees for sale, delaying allotment of seeds, manure, fertiliser, pesticides, etc. Contracts for building roads, houses and other projects taken or given on bribe, off-loading of low quality food on to midday meals for school children or in ration shops are some examples of the handiwork of the strong to benefit at the expense of the weak.

The strong, once they get a hold of the state machinery, and encrusting themselves on the surface of the state-society border, form a very clear shadow line on the region's political culture. It is here that the sub-elite congregate. The local sub-elites unlike the strong are the 'executives' working at their behest. The shelter which they acquire is guarded tenaciously. Their roots reaching into the region, if shaken, leads to bitter rivalry and violence. These are the places where 'flush money' abounds.

### **Constituency politics in Nilgiris**

Let us go back to the institutional structure of the state which is hijacked by the strong, whose values are built around their own 'self-interest', carefully coated with the language of the state whose characteristics were mentioned earlier. It is no longer people who elect representatives to make policy, but policies getting to be worked out by the strong to suit their own interest. Constituency politics is merely an arena for the above to be legitimised. Their weak status sees to it that the Mullukurumbas cannot use the elections to overthrow the strong because elections are not seen capable of resolving

competition between the weak and the strong, but between two or more candidates who represent the strong. The outcome of the elections serves no vital purpose for the weak. Elections generate cynicism which runs deep among the weak while passions run high among the strong.

Constituency politics to the weak, as reflected during election time, becomes a 'could be opportunity' for pragmatic monetary gain. For the strong, it is a time for shake up, a time to readjust oneself to a position of better and more comfortable appropriation. Elections then are for legitimisation, to keep the flag of democracy outside the doors of the legislative assembly. Every gesture at election time heightens the pragmatic and ephemeral, as the weak take the 'could be' stance.

In Nilgiris then, it is not the weak who elect the local representative, it is the strong who recruit them. The local representatives and the sub-elites become one and the same. A central core of the regional party in power in Nilgiris that assume a cultic image reflecting another highly visible rule of high politics. The consequences of this in Nilgiris is that it is not by achievement nor by ascription as much as it is by conscription that local representatives/sub-elites emerge. This conscription is from a sub-elite whose interests generally coincide with the strong. The strong in fact protect and use the sub-elites as a buffer against any segment of the society that may rise against them.

The conscripted climb the political ladder in Nilgiris by impressing the strong rather than the weak. It results in its own form of political behaviour. At the lower end, their activities include pasting posters in prominent places, raising

large cut-outs or party flags at important junctions, sorting out village and local fights as well as 'silencing' those who make 'unfavourable' political 'noises', advertising in papers praising the 'achievements' of the strong above them. The most visible example of the latter is the full page blow ups of the Chief Minister that appear in newspapers for any number of reasons.

One instance of such an 'advertisement' ought to be analyzed for it portrays in a classical manner the cultural manifestation of this networking of the strong. Last year, the Chief Minister of Tamilnadu was conferred a honorary doctorate by a 'private Medical University'. The reasons cited in the advertisement, for such an honour, was the determination of the Chief Minister to eradicate cheap liquor, raise the amount of money given by the state to assist pre-natal mothers among others . . . . But the deeper reason for such an advertisement was that the Chief Minister 'fought' for political reasons to 'help out' the 'private Medical University' which had been taken over by the previous Government and affiliated to the University of Madras.

The Chief Minister on taking office after the elections in 1992 for the legislative assembly in Tamilnadu had revised the decision reverting its status to a 'private Medical University'. This meant that capitation fees can be acquired as a condition for admission. What one has to note here is that such things are not said openly but different reasons are given. It is saying 'thank you' by the conscripted sub-elites in a public idiom. Though having no direct linkage to the Mullukurumbas in this study, it reveals the internal working of how the strong 'conscript' and the process by which new entrants manage to encrust themselves

in this vital niche between the state and the society, in Tamilnadu. This process, seen in such a large scale at the state level, is repeated in less vivid forms within the context of Nilgiris.

It is all the more relevant to this study to mention the fact that the 'founder' of the Medical University is himself a self acclaimed 'liquor baron'. Eradication of brewing cheap liquor hence is positively income enhancing from a business point of view. Reprivatization, apart from generating additional income, provides a classic route to acquiring a decent image for a 'don' to move up in to circles of high politics. Party colours are blatantly flaunted as competition from other fellow traders is eliminated. Here is an example of a conscript who has been able to make it good. This is where constituency and commercial politics meet. This peculiar form of politics enables the conscripted sub-elites to improve their chances. This form of self perpetuation is sometimes the only way into the circle of the strong higher up. It results in the emergence of a shadow culture where contractors, business men, dealers in illicit liquor, plantation owners among others find an arena for mobility.

Constituency politics in the state reflects the fact that Members of the Legislative Assembly and politicians in general are not 'ideology' oriented. It results in (1) a lack of unified perspective on issues and (2) a constant increase in the 'malignancy' factor in society. Both these factors feed on one another, resulting in, on the part of the elected to look for circumstances that would enable them to get the most for themselves. While giving the overall impression that 'incompetency' to tackle issues leads to removal of elected politicians, the



reality is high competition among the strong, which causes the same. This results in a high turn over of members of Legislative Assemblies in such an insecure environment.

Showing allegiance to ones leader becomes vital. C.P. Pattabhiraman, the newly inducted Tamilnadu Minister on his induction is quoted as having said the following,

As far as I am concerned, the AIADMK is my temple, J (Jayalalitha, the Chief Minister) is my goddess, the direction shown by her is my path way and her words my Veda.<sup>14</sup>

There are not many ruling party members in the Legislative Assembly in Tamilnadu who do not have a tattoo mark of their 'leader' on their bodies. This reflects the practice of a populist facade of politics, behind which one sees a patron-clientage that creates its own rules in Nilgiris. Add to this the 'charismatic personality based politics' which results in the contextualisation of contest for political office in 'personal' terms.

Justification of ones position involves 'splitting up the enemy' into visible halves as much as splitting up oneself into two identities. By doing the first, one communicates the point that there is a deep conspiracy to destroy oneself that even mutual enemies combine. By following the second mode, one communicates the point that the game is not played fairly according to rules which should be taken to mean that one ought not to be questioned because one occupies a particular role in the structure. In both cases the 'issues' are evaded and not allowed to stick. A case for justification on the basis of 'who is who' and not

'what is what'. This creates a culture of vengeance among the strong, in their struggle for power.

High politics then becomes a mechanism not for what it is meant for but a terrain where revenge and overcoming of one's opponents regardless of who may actually be in the right is fought out. By looking at constituency politics over a period of time, it looks as if new governments come, corrupt politicians swindle and the weak still vote for them. This gives rise to the question, crucial to this study, are the weak in the state and specifically, the Mullukurumbas in Nilgiris, tolerant or politically dumb ? To answer this question one needs to find more about the scope available for the weak to pursue their own ends.

The Mullukurumbas do not play a dominating part in the taluk panchayat. The fieldwork carried out in the villages reveal that although Mullukurumbas find representation from their group in all the village panchayats, at the next higher level -- the taluk Panchayat - they have only one representative. It is commonly believed by the Mullukurumbas one spoke to, that (1) they consider the Mullukurumba member as the sole representative of the Mullukurumba community, rather than the whole body of the electorate. This is the commonly accepted view of representative bodies in Nilgiris. (2) This self-acclaimed representative of the Mullukurumbas said that he 'speaks in the Taluk Panchayat meetings for the Mullukurumbas' but, also added that 'in practice not a single thing they needed had been done'.

The Mullukurumbas do not have any representative from their group presently in the district council - the Zilla Parishad. The overall assumption of

the Mullukurumbas who have had experience as representatives is, with regard to the Panchayat institutions at the village, taluk and district level, whatever be the representation conveyed to these bodies by the Mullukurumbas it ends up inhibited through decision making or over ridden by higher ups, ruling out legitimacy of some options, curtailing independent analysis, suppression of information, among others. What one sees then is a constriction of views of the Mullukurumbas. While in reality, what comes down as development is what is believed by the state as relevant to the needs of the Mullukurumbas.

The gulf between the state, which claims willingness to develop and the tribal populace, unable to climb the ladder of electoral politics in Nilgiris, is not only huge, but, also wedged in by the strong in such a way, that communication is not only halted between the two, but never materialises. In terms of constituency politics in Nilgiris, the result is that neither do representatives emerge, nor, middle-men conscripted. The weak do not cumulatively acquire enough valued means to counter the strong. High politics then is a make believe where the response of the weak can be pictured as follows. It resembles a ball game where only the strong have the know-how to fill the ball with air every time it goes flat. The weak, who are at a disadvantage, instead of challenging the strong to replace the ball, play along even to the point of calling them 'living legends'. At a superficial level it is keeping out of debate, a truism, that both the strong and the weak know full well.

### **The outcome in terms of group politics.**

This make-believe suits both the strong and the weak. For the strong, it means that the weak can be exploited, survival made a struggle, and the weak always in need of attention. Ironically it appears that the weak agree to this arrangement, (the logic of this is elaborated in the section dealing with 'sangamam' - the Movement for pan-tribal autonomy). Meanwhile, the game of high politics continues; the resources of the state is abused and the society condemned. High politics provides a make believe competition, between the strong and the weak, while real competition is confined to the strong.

Added to this, is an additional vacuum for elite penetration. The state has too many and too few controls at the same time. Detailed physical controls exist side by side with a total neglect of other equally important weapons of control. This vacuum generates shortages. In this situation, some can raise themselves up by shifting the entire burden of shortages on to others' shoulders. In other words, advantageous use of shortages takes place. The strong thrive, with the aid of black money, creating a sense of injustice, even as they undermine the legitimacy of the system. To them, it is not two systems, black and white, but one, an inverted logic where one cannot make do without the presence of both.

Translated in terms of group politics in Nilgiris two dominant groups corner all the advantages. The indigenous Badagas and the rapidly increasing number of migrants from the plains form an alliance that corners all the above mentioned advantages. While the Badagas man almost all the political positions in the region, the economic elites are drawn from the migrants.

### **Low politics: The way out for the weak.**

This can be described best by analyzing the 'laws' in Nilgiris. Society in Nilgiris, as mentioned earlier, has its own set of parallel laws; a set of rules that define the black, white and grey areas of political, social and economic correctness. When the weak, as personified by the Mullukurumbas in this example, fall on the black area, defined as such by both the state and society, they are invariably helpless. When they are in an area acclaimed as white, by both, they find themselves holders of authority or close to the authority structures of both the state and society. However, what is relevant to this study, is the analysis of grey areas. It is here that the polarisation of the weak Mullukurumbas occurs and their choices limited. The cutting edge of the state - society conflict pushes and prods the Mullukurumbas to move into the white and black areas of the state and society. This movement is contingent upon the ability of the Mullukurumbas to form links among the weak groups. This is due to the fact that the strong seize the means offered by democracy, to impose upon the Mullukurumbas, conditions that appear state directed but in reality compromise with the society.

The strong, having bottled up the state, create a facade of the state in their person. By giving enormous scope for the Mullukurumbas to imagine a 'two step away state' the strong acquire authority instead. The strong appear to the weak as ones who require 'respect' and 'honour'. To the weak, the strong personify the state in their flesh and blood. Relationship between the strong and the weak then requires interaction according to a certain logic. It is based

according to norms of generosity laid on by the strong. The strong see laws materialistically, as an acquisition, thereby mentally denying the right of the weak to use it. This gives rise to the universalisation of the 'damned if you do and damned if you don't' philosophy. For the weak, the laws require an ambiguous accommodation where importance has to be given to the strong 'other', even as credit is withheld from the weak 'self'. The strong reiterate by this a truism that the weak are not valued, but what they have, is valued.

Northorp's law states that laws are effective only when the norms it introduces correspond to the underlying normative inner order habits of the living law of the people to whom it is applied. This is the reason why statutory laws are so readily bent in Nilgiris for it is incongruous to the living law of society in Nilgiris. Laws that matter to the Mullukurumbas hence by and large are taken over by the strong. Laws then do not curb particular behaviour but enables certain power holders - the strong - to distribute among themselves the 'right' to use laws as a source of revenue. Laws or rules that aim to determine behaviour now become the personal property of the strong.

Having said that, if the Mullukurumbas break the law, a bribe to the holder of power will provide access to that which is denied earlier. In Nilgiris this would mean, dues having to be paid to use the 'official's' law. If on the other hand, a bribe is not paid, not only is access denied, but the wrath of the concerned official is vent upon the weak. This is, for not obeying the norms of the political culture where (a) the power holder owns the set of rules he is responsible for and (b) by owning it has a right to take a payment even if no

infringement of the same occurs. The holder of power would then interpret non-payment by the weak as a denial by the weak of the power holder's authority. For the Mullukurumbas it no longer becomes 'obedience to law', but a game of risk taking against the law enforcing strong.

In that sense, law is used by the strong. Law making and enforcing is then serious business for a different reason. For the strong, it becomes imperative not to give the impression that it is lawlessness that prevails. It is not lawlessness but a facade of law behind which another game with its own rules operate. To claim dishonesty of the strong becomes a disappointing experience because the laws have enough holes favourable for the strong who abuse it as their property, to argue their way through. On the other hand, the facade is so dutifully protected by the others that the honest official who wishes to see law as impersonal and hence by that meaning law not as a source of revenue, is considered as not playing according to the prevailing norms of the political culture in Nilgiris.

To the Mullukurumbas, for example, law forbidding access to forest produce has a corollary attached to their mental understanding. One can take what one should not by law, home, or sell it, by paying the forest official when he comes calling. In that sense, a kind of market mechanism operates, a give and take, a buying and selling . . . . The Mullukurumbas do not see this as exploitation, they see no discrepancy in such behaviour at all. In fact, this is advantageous to the Mullukurumbas. This is not surprising when seen in the larger context of a rapid erosion of traditional laws of the Mullukurumbas on the one

hand, and the 'exclusivistic' laws of the state that compound the vulnerability of their rights on the other. Here in the practice of 'parallel laws' is one more opportunity to bargain, where none should exist in reality. If the Mullukurumbas refuse to pay the forest official, they will be refused entry into the forest, a stand-off relationship that does not interest both the Mullukurumbas and the forest official (note that we are not describing high politics but low politics). Law takes a back seat, but then a powerful back seat. It can be called up, not when someone infringes it, but only to remind those Mullukurumbas, who have broken it once, that they are 'guilty'. ( Here guilt is not about breaking the law but failing to pay the official who owns it.) However it is not used in too obvious a manner, for it would altogether remove the access to bribe the official.

In that sense, both the Mullukurumbas and the forest officials relate to one another within a grey area that includes a range of behaviour, from violence to pleading on the part of the officials and bold action that denies authority, to running away on the part of the Mullukurumbas. The Mullukurumbas though not able to change the 'system', however, in terms of the non-absolutist definition of weakness that is used in this thesis, have enough capacity to understand the mechanism of this give and take within which they manoeuvre. The Mullukurumbas learn to manipulate law for their purposes to make it express their concern and serve their ambitions. They devise new patterns of avoidance and evasion of rules promulgated at the upper reaches of the system. The law in operation is always a compromise that swings between lawyers law and parochial notions of legality. The law on the surface hides an 'under life' that makes



society in Nilgiris what it is, where even the weak have a space.

**High politics: a dead end for the weak.**

The agencies of law and administration in Nilgiris invariably portray the image of awesomeness, of power, of an inflexibility that comes out of strict adherence to formal rules, but, in reality only seem to say that all interaction can be done through an intermediary, the middlemen. It is as if the state and society have come to a mutual conclusion that neither the state nor the society should be blamed for what goes on but lay it on the 'intermediary', the 'middlemen' - The agents of Indian capitalism in this study - the strong. One result of this is institutional weakness. For Satish Saberwal,

The durability and vigour of institutions rest on performance to predictable standards by most actors associated with institutions: and this is likely to be realised only when related standards and patterns of conduct are being learned extensively - propagated by the same or other institutions, perhaps through routine experience early in ones life, possibly within the family of ones birth . . . gaps may be called social blanks.<sup>15</sup>

This weakness of institutionalisation leads to two alternative ways of making demands by the constantly expanding number of participants: violence and corruption. Religious ethics in the Nilgiris places a strong hurdle on the path of revolution, to change the status quo. On the other hand, replacing corrupt exploitative people from power is talked about, while surreptitious support is given for their continuance. In fact, by and large there is a taking up of a pro-authority stance, beginning from the family. Local ethics give the idea that

Karma - ones duty - will create the grounds for ones own rise or fall. It is a myth that is disproved every time it proves itself. Yet, it persists.

How then does dissent as a form of reaction occurs in the Nilgiris ? In the arena of politics, dissent in Nilgiris is not an attempt to replace the system. For the weak, dissent never gets to reach the level of organised revolution; for in their perception the constitution of Nilgiri society does not prescribe an alternative to itself. Hence political dissent by both the strong and the weak is to get the pendulum of power sharing to the equilibrium position and not to begin ticking to a different beat.

In effect, William Rikers 'Winning coalition' is the final outcome, albeit in a different context. The same principle operates.

The uncertainty of the real world and the bargaining situation forces coalition members (in this case both the weak and the strong) to aim at a subjectively estimated 'thin winning coalition' rather than an actual minimum.<sup>16</sup>

This winning coalition in Nilgiris is at the expense of the state. It serves the interest of both the strong and the weak and by maintenance of this, the weak attempt to manoeuvre towards the attainment of valued means. For it is in transaction of these that the definition and relative positioning of the strong and the weak arise. This is discussed in detail in a later chapter.

Coming back to high politics, one of the characteristics of the society in the Nilgiris is that there is a palpable gulf between the tribal peoples and the larger society. This creates instant hurdles on all fronts, for the Mullukurumbas in high politics, due to their small number. This is not helped by the fact that

they are neither able to form a pan-tribal group formidable enough to take on the other forces in society. The strong know full well this weakness of the tribal people, very specially the Mullukurumbas. They take full advantage of the gulf between the tribal peoples and society. So much so, if at any time Mullukurumbas or any other tribal people are able to form a pan-tribal group formidable enough to take on the non-tribal society, as in Jharkhand or the North-east the strong fall back on the provisions of the Indian Constitution, as it has happened in the above places, to stall it. Otherwise, they run the region more on the turf of parallel laws that are based on the whims and fancies of the authorities hold on the written law.

The society, around the Mullukurumbas on the other hand is not merely a substance, but more, a process. In a very important sense it exists only in and through the action of its individual members. The boundaries of the society is fluid, its parts run into each other, creating certain 'givens' which the Mullukurumbas have to contend with, on a day to day basis. The social mind of the other groups in the Nilgiris accepts these givens. One of which is a diversity as a hierarchical system rather than a horizontal system of equals. The Mullukurumbas are then made a second rate copy of the non-tribal society at best. Politics then, to the Mullukurumbas, is to try to change this position, not by pushing the strong, nor rebelling against the society directly or reaching towards the state. This is because one of the basic ingredients of the political culture described earlier is a 'state - society' incongruence. Also, wedged in by the strong, this does not allow scope for anything much to be achieved by the

Mullukurumbas in the arena of high politics. The Mullukurumbas then, learn ways to acquire valued means within a political culture that denies returns through a legitimate terrain.

**Sangamam: an attempt to carve out a space in high politics.**

Before looking more closer at low politics, let us analyze high politics in Nilgiris and the position that Mullukurumbas occupy within it. To begin with, let us look at 'Sangamam; a pan-tribal 'summit' as it were, where representatives of all the tribal groups of the region including Nilgiris, Wyanaad and Coorg, met for a week between October 12th and the 19th in Mananthavady, Kerala. Having described the political culture in Nilgiris in the earlier pages, the analysis of 'sangamam' the Movement of the same name is vital, for concluding what high politics has to offer to the weak and how it is perceived by the Mullukurumbas.

Roy Burman in analyzing politics in North-east India states,

When completely isolated tribal communities closely articulate with state structures almost as a reflex action they adopt a viability strategy. The neighbouring tribes at a similar level of technology and having the same or complementary structures of social communication, accept the reinterpretation and elaborations of their culture and traditions so as to forge a united identity for protecting traditional rights and interests particularly in respect of the resources which constitute essential ingredients of their survival systems. This can be described as 'infra-nationalism' as the promotional role is frequently played by a messianic individual. He symbolises the explosion of an unformulated urge rather than a systematically and consciously built up approach.<sup>17</sup>

To say that rapid changes, especially since independence, as mentioned earlier, has created a sense of deprivation among the tribal people in Nilgiris, is not far from the truth. Not only have tribal people in Nilgiris suffered deprivation and become the weak, but, non-tribal people especially landless labourers and marginal farmers as a whole. However the sense of 'legitimate suffering' is felt more among the indigenous tribal people, rather than the new comers, in Nilgiris. It is obvious in Nilgiris that the dominant proponents of change have been the non-indigenous; the non-tribal people. In the case of the tribal people, the root cause of almost all their present ills are effectively placed on the non-tribal aliens from the plains. One important facet of this perception has been the deep felt belief that the alien and the state have a strange relationship which works in tandem towards the destructive goal of undermining the indigenous people. In spite of this, there has never been in Nilgiris, a bonding among the tribal people against the non-tribal establishment as they see it.

#### **Counter-elites and Pan-tribal unity.**

With this as background, it is no surprise that in the present day Nilgiris, the holding together of this pan-tribal group together, with different identities and often mutually divergent interests in the fight against this common enemy, is not by a messianic leader from within, but a group of outsiders - activists - primarily, voluntary agencies and the communist party cadre in the Nilgiris.

One crucial difference is that these counter-elites sharpen the focus of the tribal people to see in this large alien population of plainsmen, few

significant people - the strong - and place on them the 'causative factor' for the present condition of the tribal people. Also, these counter-elites attempt to effectively translate a visible social division into a political category of 'them and us'. Nevertheless, in this specific instance, the widely disparate nature of the counter-elites, which reflects a divergence in leadership, results in the difficulty to portray the 'opponents' as one solidary interest group. Also included, is the presenting to the opponents the pan-tribal grouping as a solidarity, united in interest and purpose.

#### **The philosophical justification for the role of counter-elites.**

Take the case of voluntary agencies. For one activist in Nilgiris, the aim of the voluntary agencies is to implant (a) social justice; to assist the tribal people to consciously analyze the geographical and historical reasons which have caused social and economic injustice to their society (b) self reliance; to make available to communities the means which will enable them to involve themselves with self-respect and become conscious of their power and potential in planning, financing and administering development to themselves and (c) improvement of living conditions; to help the communities to obtain the means for the improvement of their low standard of living, degraded health and nutrition, unhygienic conditions, education, health etc.

Note the close parallel to the concept of growth with social justice - the basic philosophy underlying the Indian economic planning. The route adopted by the voluntary agencies is to focus on empowerment of the Mullukurumbas,

through literacy, numeracy and functionality and very specially, a specific awareness component which they attempt to create through a network of highly motivated volunteers who reach every hamlet and thus, constantly in touch with the learners. It also involves the sensitisation by these activists in a more dramatic way, than ever before, to the conditions of existence of the tribal people themselves.

In the case of the Mullukurumbas, it is an attempt to convince that 'they are not the only ones,' meaning, contextualise change, in terms of it being, against tribal people. By that, the voluntary agencies aim to create a world of possibilities, that primarily begins, by reacting to change in those specified and contextualised terms. In turn, the belief is that tribal people, including the Mullukurumbas, can be united around certain shared values. On the basic level, it is hoped that the tribal people would therefore defy the blandishments and threats from outside forces, face indifference and hostility from the strong, as well as society and creating a greater concern for the self, would carve for themselves a place in high politics.

Both the state, with its philosophy of 'growth with justice' and the voluntary agencies, with its philosophy of 'empowerment', fail to recognise a vital factor of reality. The abstractness of these two philosophies, both western and external to the local environment and politics, do not mix and suffuse with the vital requirement of the weak in Nilgiris primarily because these philosophies do not attempt to change the rules of power sharing as existent in its political culture.

**Pan-tribal identity: an intermediate level tie.**

Getting back to the objectives of carving a place for the tribal people in the arena of high politics, the way to achieve this is imagined possible through the creation of a pan-tribal identity. For the Mullukurumbas, pan-tribal identity is an outer layer in a set of concentric circles which unfold outwards. The counter-elites aim to draw upon this in order to create a constituency for the tribal people. It involves symbolism as well as historicising events in the present memory of the tribal people. This 'creative' effort is to bring together groups with different cultures, language and costumes and through such a meeting, create a feeling of 'you are not alone'. This consciousness would, it is assumed, lead to sharing of problems, a sense of unity, meaning by that, a feeling of strength and as a result, a common front to

**fight the strong.**

Common problems create a common interest, it is believed. The problems in this case are land alienation, displacement, eviction of non-tribal land grabbers, problems with forest officials, atrocities faced as tribal people, loss of rights to forest and forest produce among others. Voluntary agencies desire to create alternate intermediate level ties, other than caste, language and region. It is hoped that this intermediate ties of 'pan-tribal' identity, though different from the weak impersonal ties of political parties and a bureaucratic state or strong personal ties of family and religion, once created, can be used to blend and balance the two, thus garnering power to the weak. Once again, another rule



of politics - power sharing - is over ridden by the voluntary agencies and the consequences are clear.

Identity formation by the Mullukurumbas, discussed earlier which is more effective and legitimate fit for the rules of this game is ignored and instead undermined. The voluntary agencies instead, are thinking of an impersonal, intermediate tie, based on a pan-tribal identity. This superficially simulates Jharkhand, in this case, carved from the three states of Tamilnadu, Karnataka and Kerala. Ties based on this identity fails to materialise for two reasons (a) an inability to focus grievance against a common enemy which is discussed later and (b) an inability to contextualise or create the framework within which change is understood, interpreted and justified.

#### **The thin strands of intermediate level ties.**

Getting back to the formation of a pan-tribal identity and the symbolism and historicising that goes with it. Among other things, by historicising, what is meant here is not mere choice of dates, such as October 12th 1992, when the sangamam was held. It was on this day, in 1492, that Columbus landed on Waitling island, in his venture to find the new world, which is generally interpreted, as sounding the death knell of tribal people all over the world. The same day, 190 years ago, the tribal people of Wyanaad, led by a Kuruchiya tribal leader, Thalakal Chandu, supposedly destroyed a British fort, at Panamaram, a place 8 kilometres from Mananthavady in Kerala.

Historicising does not end there, it goes beyond it. It is based on picking

up historical incidents in such a way that it leads to the stretching of the identity of tribal people beyond the frontiers of local time and place. It is to delegitimise the historicisation held sacrosanct by the non-tribal people and reinterpret the past in such a way, that the peripheralised tribal people in the Nilgiris - the weak - are made to see themselves as the people of the centre. It is the same process that the Indian 'freedom fighters' adopted against British historicisation through the invention of a 'golden age'.

The same goes for symbolism, for example, the usage of Adijyothis, meaning eternal flame or torches, symbolising tribal solidarity. Different tribal peoples brought a representative flame from their own regions and villages to a common venue and merged it into a single flame. The motifs used during the week long 'Sangamam' presented a picture of nature and tribal culture. Trees were prominent, providing a visible link to a thickly forested past, thereby taking the mind back, contrasting it with the 'deforested' state of present day Nilgiris. Also, it was a portraying of the forests as something significant in the lives of the tribal peoples that all of them could identify and react to as a pan-tribal people.

Behind the effort remains the need, not only for a symbol that can embody the idea of unity, where no unity of this kind had existed before, but also for a cause, that never manifested earlier in this form. Above all, it is a symbol that is expected to be acceptable to the tribal peoples concepts of political change. The symbolism is above all an artifact of a practical attempt to unify the tribal people. It expects them to abandon their separate histories of origin and

legitimacy or else consign these to silent acceptance.

Moving over to leadership, it is alien to the tribal people and very specially for the Mullukurumbas. A sense of social activism drawn from an ideology that ranges from the liberation theology of the church to Marxism, binds them in this pursuit of change. The value framework, in terms of which they state their goals, are neither shared by the tribal people nor legitimised by them. It is alien to the traditional framework of values and interest organisation of the tribal people in the Nilgiris. This results in the need for myths, to bridge the gap.

They are myths, in the sense, they are not the lived-in and experienced history of a group. This specific interpretation is placed within the context of an overall ideology of the voluntary agencies and their mode of identity formation.

For Richard Lannoy they are

an all embracing consciousness, (that) cannot develop so long as the mythic sub-structure is not replaced by a firm sense of history.<sup>18</sup>

In other words, what is mythical to one's group does not help to forge this tie. For the Mullukurumbas, they find the historicising of the voluntary agencies external to their own history. It is like being in a 'history warp', not in an insulated or an isolated sense, but, in a self-woven sense, which when compared, appears strange to the point of appearing as myths to one another, though both are histories. Here then is another obstacle that is stubbornly ignored by the counter elites. It halts the emergence of a pan-tribal identity. It also fails to convince the Mullukurumbas to play a significant part in high politics.

### **The long and short term goals.**

With regard to the counter elites trying to rearrange state, society, the strong and the weak, they problematize the situation of present day power sharing in Nilgiris in such a way that the Mullukurumbas are being pushed out of their space, as are other tribal peoples. The goals of the Movement are both short as well as long term. In the short term, the demands and goals include, one hectare of land to each tribal family, special courts to be instituted to deal with their 'unique' problems, amendments to statutes so as to allow tribal people their traditional rights to forest produce, primary education in the tribal peoples own specific mother tongue, filling up of all posts reserved for tribal people, at least 50 percent of all jobs in the forest department to be manned by tribal people and finally, decision making by tribal people as a serious component of all plans constituted for their development.

A few points are in place here. This manifesto like demands or goals is in fact a two-sided coin. On the one hand, they are used by the voluntary agencies as promises, to bring within their fold the tribal people through interest aggregation, albeit, seen from their own specific view points and on the other hand, articulate, on behalf of the tribal people, the same as demands to be fulfilled by the state. By this process, they expect to become a counter wedge to the strong, thereby assuming the role of honest middlemen between the state and the peripheralised tribal people.

Having taken that stand, the counter-elites who aspire to re-channel development to the tribal people, compromise with the strong. They become pro-

weak in the selective curative sense, than becoming anti-strong in the preventive sense. Unlike the institutions of family and religion, which the Mullukurumbas use to resist, no such intrinsically rooted mechanism has emerged. This short term demand of reinstating the weak tribal people, including the Mullukurumbas, as players in the game of high politics, makes the voluntary agencies allies at best to the weak, for, as mentioned earlier, they cannot alter the role of the strong, in the game of high politics. It is because the core issue, is not the weakness of the weak but the taking over of the role of the state, by the strong. The strong have become the umpires.

With regard to the long term goals, the demand is for autonomy. For some, it is the only solution or arrangement possible. It means giving the tribal people a contiguous tribal territory comprising parts of Wyanaad, Coorg and the Nilgiris which had been parcelled out to different states - Kerala, Karnataka and Tamilnadu respectively. The assumption being, that it would be the only way out for the weak tribal peoples to participate in 'high politics'. Note here, the aim is not to forge an operative relationship between the traditional society of the tribal peoples and the political institutions in the form of adaptive structures like a pan-tribal party or association as discussed earlier. The aim is to create an arena, where tribal people have a certain autonomy, or, in other words, participate in institutions, where unfavourable political conditions are absent. This argument is drawn from a history of both attempted and achieved state formation in India as seen in North-east India and Jharkhand.

The argument made in the previous page recurs again. It is believed by the

counter-elites, that the weak cannot go further unless they are politically free in the terrain of high politics. This is because the prize of high politics has to be worked out in a society that is markedly pro non-tribal people. The state is not sufficiently anti-strong and hence pro-outsiders, from the point of view of the counter-elites. It is argued, that the Mullukurumbas, like other tribal peoples, are in a disadvantageous position, where the state - umpire - in spite of the policies that it professes, is in reality a hijacked state. This only enhances the emerging status quo in the region and not vice versa. The counter-elites believe, that the only way out of this situation is autonomy for tribal people; by going out of a political culture loaded against the weak rather than staying in and fighting a losing battle. In other words, there is an acceptance by the counter-elites of their inability, to restructure state, society and the wedged strong, meaning, re- alter the rules of high politics.

#### **The divergence between the counter-elites and the weak.**

With regard to the main arguments of the study, the following become clear. Though the conclusion arrived at by the counter elites and the weak - the Mullukurumbas - are the same, what differs is the strategy of reaction. First, the counter-elites believe, that high politics is the only legitimate arena for power sharing to be worked out. The Mullukurumbas do not agree to this view. For them, low politics and participation in it, is justifiable, because the moral argument behind high politics is loaded against them. One can also interpret this,

as the Mullukurumbas being convinced that the counter-elites are declaring a fact of power sharing, which by association could lead to the detriment of their already vulnerable position. Compare this with the character of Mrs. Poyser in George Eliot's *Adam Bede*.<sup>19</sup> For Scott, 'when she finally has her say, her gesture represents a shared hidden transcript that no one yet had the courage to declare in the teeth of power.'<sup>20</sup> One ought to also compare this with the oft-repeated paradox Subaltern studies reveal, that actual rebellion and direct expression of power in the terrain of high politics is the immediate precursor of a damning restatement of hegemony by the stronger groups. Here lies one major point of difference between the shrewd weak and the well-meaning counter-elites.

Secondly, the 'autonomy' articulated by the counter-elites, arises from the perception that the exclusively tribal character of the peoples should be preserved. In other words, it calls for maintaining the social, political and cultural systems that the Mullukurumbas maintained prior to the emergence of politics of post-colonial India. This arises from the belief, that modern politics is fundamentally detrimental to the tribal people. For the Mullukurumbas, the externally introduced politics is no doubt detrimental, but they see the need for their own indigenous system to mingle in an organic sense, simplistically described, as layered. The benign and malignant, the apparent and real, the surface and the depth, are not so clearly divisible, making the Mullukurumbas, decry the need for autonomy.

Going further, the counter elites do not attempt to change the rule of

high politics, but, expect the weak tribal people to revert to the past, in terms of time and stay out within the artificially created boundary of autonomy. This is a contradiction at two visible levels: (1) a failure to counter the strong and (2) going back to the past and going out of the boundary of high politics and thereby recreate the same. It is, among other things, a failure to understand the political culture of the region. As a result, by going against a rule of high politics. They aim to achieve success, which is not realistically possible and after achieving it, go back to negating the same rule. Interpreted in the specific case of the Mullukurumbas, it is expecting them, who are debarred from high politics because they do not qualify according to the rule of numbers, to deny their Mullukurumba identity by creating space for a pan-tribal identity and then go back to being Mullukurumbas, once autonomy is achieved.

Now, let us presume that the counter-elites aim at half and half; that is, change the rules that govern present day high politics in the Nilgiris, where Mullukurumbas no longer identify themselves as Mullukurumbas, but, have a pan-tribal identity and on the other hand, give up the demand for autonomy. This would be a refusal to retrace their steps towards a bygone cultural stage of living. What they will end up with, will be an accentuation of group identities, which in this case, would be highly buttressed with myths. In the arena of high politics, the consequences of this would be another form of dysfunctional democracy.

This 'horizontal comradeship'<sup>21</sup>, the counter-elites attempt to create, is antithetical to the exclusivistic kind of politics in the Nilgiris. The process of



modernisation, forces the Mullukurumbas to conform to a particular form of identity creation, which requires constant comparison with other groups in the proximity, in this case, other tribal and non-tribal groups. This exclusivistic orientation of the Mullukurumbas which serves as a vital base for low politics, stalls the horizontal comradeship that the counter-elites attempt to create.

What can be termed as achievements of the counter-elites is their bringing into the larger national public domain, the consciousness of a struggle between the strong and the weak. In common parlance one comes across the phrase, 'a mini-Jharkhand in the making'. Also, crucially, to a very small extent, the counter-elites have been able to highlight the fact that the struggle between the strong and the weak has to be confined within the terrain of high politics, for the overall good of the polity. In the final analysis, how does the efforts of the counter elites turn out in practice ? What we see at best, is a tertiary response to the call of the voluntary agencies, among the tribal people. It is only the educated youth, who respond to the articulation of these new values and ideas. In other words, one can interpret, that the forces that hold back the Sangamam, as not merely political and economic. Secondly, the conjunction of the interests of the Mullukurumbas and the counter-elites, vital for its success, fails to materialise.

#### **Comparison of the politics of Tamilnadu and Kerala.**

Finally, analysis of the political culture in Nilgiris will be incomplete without asking the following question. What is the impact of the media in

enabling the weak to participate in high politics? One needs to compare Nilgiris in Tamilnadu with the neighbouring state of Kerala, where a Mullukurumba has been a Member of the Legislative Assembly. Apart from reservation of seats in the Legislative Assembly in Kerala, where there are eleven seats reserved for the Scheduled tribes while there is only one in Tamilnadu. The immediate picture that comes to mind, is the diametrically different trends in the culture of politics in the two states. In Kerala the role of the communist party and its intermittent formation of government has created its own imprint, while in Tamilnadu, a film culture, intertwined with a dravidian ideology, has created a different one.

When one considers the pillars of the economic sector, such as plantations in Nilgiris, a combination of organisational and political support from powerful and strategic unions, along with the strong presence of the communist party, as in Kerala, is absent. This difference, personifies to a considerable extent, the lack of structural support that further projects starkly the weakness of the weak. Looking closer at the impact of the media, in Kerala, the emphasis on the written word has made it the dominant reference source, unlike Tamilnadu, where films have taken its place. Incidentally, Kerala has the highest newspaper reading rate in India.<sup>22</sup> Literacy in Kerala's progressive and mobilised political environment, further, enhances political awareness. A far greater percentage of villagers in Kerala, can read about their demands and struggles in Malayalam magazines and Newspapers. The consequences hence are certainly different.

In that sense, the impact of the written word in Tamilnadu politics

combined with a relatively low literacy has not been able to push films aside. The dominant mass media - films in Tamilnadu - has only created 'cultural change', unlike the written word which has buttressed structural change in Kerala. The relevancy of the written word, to the effective participation of the weak in high politics, becomes obvious. Also important, is the structural change brought about by the 1969 land reforms in Kerala. A relatively more rigorous redistribution of excess land, has place in a superior political position, those who are most vulnerable, in terms of land.

Finally, one other question that needs to be asked is, What do elections mean to the Mullukurumbas? The Mullukurumbas do not relate voting to larger questions of public policy, governance and maintenance of democratic political order or to socio-economic concerns, but, mainly to parochial concerns. Voting is a trade-off for the Mullukurumba; this trade-off, for the strong, is a legitimisation of their governance and for the Mullukurumba (a) a recognition of their space (b) a monetary gain among others.

For the Mullukurumbas, the outcome of elections is not going to be different, if they vote or not. For them, the ideal response is captured emphatically, by the couplet from a film song, which translated into English, would roughly mean, 'I do not care at all, whether Rama or Ravana rules'. However, for the strong, if the Mullukurumbas vote, it is better, especially if they can be sure who the Mullukurumbas would vote for. Elections, in fact, heighten the conflict between the strong. The spread effect of such a conflict,

is the strong having to go to the weak. Elections, then become a time when the strong are willing to take 'chances'. Therefore, elections in Nilgiris, become an opportunity for monetary and material gain, for the Mullukurumbas. The strong become dependant on the weak, albeit temporarily. An alliance is forged. The tangible benefits for the weak as mentioned by the Mullukurumbas include, roads being laid, installation of water taps that work, even the mid day meal rice being of a better quality . . . offers for attending meetings come with free meals attached. For the weak, the outcome of the elections is foregone, but, for the strong it is not.

Focusing attention on the weak and their role within the political culture of Nilgiris described above, one conclusion can be drawn above all else. The nature of politics and the rules of the game, deny the Mullukurumbas the ability to acquire the valued means of land, labour and identity. The reasons are as follows: (1) The strong who occupy the niche between the state and society, turn into umpires who determine the nature of politics itself (2) The counter-elites as demonstrated in their role as spearheads of 'sangamam' do not have an answer that is curative. Instead, they aim to persuade the state, to create a 'Jharkhand' motivated autonomous region, for the tribal people in Nilgiris. This line of thought, goes against the grain of politics, as seen in Nilgiris. It reflects political naivety (3) The Mullukurumbas, by their apparent placid non-interest in the activities of the counter-elites and a simultaneous trade-off with the strong are communicating quite clearly, their perception of self interest, born out of a vulnerability created by the unequal nature of politics in Nilgiris.

## **Conclusion.**

In this chapter, the political culture of Nilgiris is the canvas on which the scene of interaction among the four protagonists is portrayed. The state - society conflict provides the underlying current for the tension between the strong and the weak. The state - society conflict is not only peculiar to the Nilgiris but to the wider region of Tamilnadu. State and society constantly redraw boundaries which provides

the strong opportunities to settle in those niches created. Commercial and constituency politics therefore becomes a stronghold of the strong who are able to span across regions, rooting their supports with the help of the structures of the state and conscripted elites from the Nilgiris. The weak are pushed out of the terrain of high politics.

'Sangamam' provides an opportunity to analyze the rules of high politics. The rule of high politics become visible when one analyses the failure of the counter-elites to carve out a constituency for the tribal people of Nilgiris. Nevertheless, it becomes obvious that the weak in spite of the denial of addressing their interests and needs in the terrain of high politics, refuse to tow the line of the counter-elites. The weak, one notices are shunned from high politics by the strong, but far importantly, they refuse to see in the terrain adequate returns. The reason, one begins to notice, is that the Mullukurumbas, as mentioned earlier, lies within the facade of a false exterior. Not only does reaction come from within but is also shifted away from the normally expected channel - the terrain of high politics. The identity of the weak and low politics

when combined provide far greater returns than by complying with the rules of high politics. This is explained in the next chapter.

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## CHAPTER VI

### LOW POLITICS: THE ALTERNATE TERRAIN.

#### **Introduction.**

Having analyzed the terrain of high politics where the rules of high politics do not provide scope for the Mullukurumbas to acquire valued means, this study now turns to the terrain of low politics. This chapter begins by highlighting the justification based on which the weak operate. The domination of the terrain of high politics and the imploding nature of social transformation forces the Mullukurumbas to look inwards at the institutions of family and religion to provide stability and a base for reaching to change and crisis.

This chapter analyses the behaviour of the weak in the terrain of low politics and shows the relationship of this behaviour to the institutions of family and religion on the one hand and the acquiring of valued means of low politics in Nilgiris on the other. This chapter aims to provide a departure from the perspectives of Scott and the subaltern theorists in two respects. It shows (1) how the expressive dimensions of the weak are institutionalised and (2) how the politics of the weak is indeterminate or in other words, sustained rather than sporadic.

#### **Low politics: its manifestations.**

#### **The strong as gatekeepers.**

Before analyzing the evidence, a theoretical construction of the interplay

between the strong and the weak and the justification of the weak to use the terrain of low politics is made. For Mullukurumbas, the terrain of high politics, both constituency and commercial is unfamiliar, while for the strong, it is not. Mullukurumbas, in this terrain, go about hesitating, unsure, feeling their way around as a result of the rules that govern high politics, especially numbers and wealth, while for the strong, familiarity and confidence is born out of control over access to valued resources. In the terrain of high politics, this results in the strong assuming a superiority in their relation to the Mullukurumbas. The Mullukurumbas appear predictable to the strong because they appear politically 'slow' and use fewer responses than a confident strong, who constantly consolidate their position. The Mullukurumbas having exposed their 'strangeness' acquire the image of an 'outsider' while the strong, in contrast, become the insiders of high politics.

The whole exercise assumes a deeper meaning when one realises that the Mullukurumbas initially took the state and the representatives of the state along with the multi-layered elites into confidence and expected them to guide and not dominate. Instead of a development ethos of the state that ought to nurture the Mullukurumbas to articulate their interests in this terrain, the strong have now taken away this right from the Mullukurumbas who now feel pushed to the sidelines. The Mullukurumbas now realise in the process that the choices available to them in the arena of high politics are very few.

The state, in spite of creating new institutions and undertaking policy initiatives responsive to local demands have been effectively thwarted by the phenomenon of the 'overloaded counter.' This happens because the gate keepers,

the strong, who are the faces behind the counter, deny access to the weak. For the weak, the acquisition of valued means namely, land, money and identity in high politics is hence unsubstantial.

One notices this, in cases such as land reform, labour and welfare programmes, to name a few. This is because, the state, in spite of attempting an incremental expansion of its political arena and thereby, periodically inducting new social forces, is foiled by the strong. The strong, slide into the gate-keeping roles in the new 'counters' created by the state, thereby delaying the movement of the interests of the weak to pass through. Mullukurumbas always face the problem of being excluded from expressing their interests within the confines defined as legitimate by the strong. Crucially, these actions of the strong, as 'gate-keepers' is perceived by the Mullukurumbas as a combined activity of the strong and the state. The state in this case carries the blame for failing to unburden the weak of their substantial demands. The subsequent failure of high politics to achieve change, in the eyes of the Mullukurumbas, owes more to the ambitious nature of the objectives of the state, which feeds the well-being of the strong, than the unfair tactics employed by the strong. Therein lies the justification for the Mullukurumbas becoming anti-state as much as anti-strong.

#### **The need for low politics.**

The one positive outcome out of all that the Mullukurumbas experience in the terrain of high politics is the raising of the question, what defines self in relation to the others and how can one retrieve those valued means that complement self ?. It inevitably leads to the realisation that the only terrain

available to them to regain public space in Nilgiris is the terrain of low politics. Public space, meaning, that space which allows for such actions that effectively serves the purpose of acquiring valued means.

If the terrain of low politics differs from high politics, which it does, the most conspicuous difference is with regard to 'interaction' as 'consensus formation'.<sup>1</sup> The basis for such an interaction in high politics does not occur. This is one reason why political community, so vital for the security of the weak Mullukurumbas, does not emerge. It appears that the strong take it for granted that the weak merely exist for the legitimisation of their strength. Also, once pushed out of high politics, it is believed that the weak would not exert any remarkable impact.

As mentioned in an earlier chapter, this point of view of the strong about the weak is false and its continuance at best, reflects ignorance. The point here is that the weak pushed out of high politics exhibit their resilience in other forms and in another terrain. Discontent and relative deprivation, arising out of unequal allocation of benefits, do not result in powerlessness not least due to apathy and anomie. Instead the Mullukurumbas engage in various forms of direct and indirect political action in the terrain of low politics.

### **The 'hidden transcripts' of low politics.**

For Scott, it is seen as 'resistance' which like domination, helps the weak to fight a war on two fronts.

The 'hidden transcripts' is not just behind-the-scenes griping and grumbling; it is enacted in a host of down to earth, low profile stratagems designed to minimise appropriation. In the case of slaves for

example, these stratagems have typically included theft, pilfering, feigned ignorance, shirking or careless labour, foot dragging, secret trade and production for sale, sabotage of crops, livestock and machinery, arson, flight and so on. In the case of peasants, poaching, squatting, illegal gleaning, delivery of inferior rents in kind, clearing clandestine fields and default on feudal dues have been common stratagems.<sup>2</sup>

In the case of Mullukurumbas, these hidden transcripts are justified in the terrain of low politics as means towards an end. They see it as an alternative where the efficiency is in terms of returns and far more directly observable than the terrain of high politics. Seen as such, the above stratagems, therefore, take a different colour than 'resistance' that Scott suggests. In Nilgiris, they are the different avenues by which Mullukurumbas gain access to vital source material; valued means namely, land, money and identity, perceived as denied to them, in high politics.

Justification for the use of these 'hidden transcripts' arises from the following realisation among the Mullukurumbas. They believe, that in the terrain of high politics, there are what for simplicity sake they call as 'conditions', to which both the strong and the weak carry mutual reputations. However, the performance of the weak, based on this reputation, in real terms leads to the weak neither winning or losing, but worse, getting placed 'outside'. Hence, Mullukurumbas modify their approach, and attempt to, with the help of these hidden transcripts, gain placing 'within' by nibbling at, in a far less direct and therefore a subtle but shrewd manner, the base of the other protagonists: the state, society and the strong.

### **A room to manoeuvre: strategies of the weak..**

The above justification has come about as a result of both instinct and reason. Hence, to make the above mentioned break through in 'interaction' as consensus formation, ironically, there is a need to change the terrain of politics. Added to this is the fact that in Nilgiris, too many groups are reaching for too few valued means - land, money and identity. The rationale for shifting from the terrain of high politics to low politics becomes obvious; to recover what has been lost and regain what has been given up. The terrain of low politics provides scope for 'fortifying' oneself, unlike the terrain of high politics, which highlights ones vulnerability. Experience of low politics further provides the knowledge that the detrimental consequences of high politics can be compensated.

To the Mullukurumbas, it appears that there is everything to gain, if they can grasp the conditions of low politics by the handle, and everything to lose if they continue to strive against in the unfavourable conditions of high politics. Low politics appears to be an arena where ambiguity allows the weak to say one thing and do the other, to appear one thing outside and be different inside. It allows them to get whatever is denied in high politics, by expressing an identity of weakness. In other words, just as much as the strong have a vested interest to identify themselves as the strong in high politics, there emerges the 'vested interest' in the identity of weakness and justifies for the Mullukurumbas an active participation in low politics.

What on the surface appears as a suffering from an inferiority complex, a spirit of humility, shrinking subordination, poverty, ignorance, lacking a spirit of rebellion against an order of things which they find 'harmful' turns out to be

a calculative tolerance of deprivation, low sensitivity to humiliation and cynicism with regard to the use and abuse of power by the strong in the arena of high politics. In fact, this surface view, which the strong see and take for granted, is precisely what the weak wish the strong to see.

On a deeper level, the psyche of the weak encloses a reactive cauldron as it were. Behind this facade, the Mullukurumbas far from an uncritical acceptance perceive an erosion of their legitimate space. They shape and work their reaction in order to reorder change in their favour. It is a deliberate manoeuvre which helps to conserve and effectively maximise the mileage that can be acquired from the inferiority of their status. The expressive dimension of such reaction can be found in the Mullukurumbas own cultural and religious idioms and is institutionalised. The bottom line of this reaction is; if the system abuses you, you have to go back and abuse the system.

From the perspective of the subaltern theorists,

the response of the weak to these profound dislocations range from incipient unorganised forms of protest such as flight, breach of forest rules . . . to an open confrontation with the state and elites. The method of protest characteristically used by the tribal people is burning of the forest floor. The absence of a culturally distinct buffer between the body of tribals and the autonomy the tribal peoples enjoy are germane to the particular forms taken by the conflicts between the tribal peoples and the authority of the elites as well as the state. This is also reflected in the manner in which these conflicts are represented in the consciousness of the tribal peoples themselves.<sup>3</sup>

#### **Low politics; hidden and institutionalised.**

The 'expressive dimensions of reaction' described in this chapter closely resemble the above perspectives of Scott and the Subalterns. However, the



objective of this study is not to prove to the reader that such reactions exist, but to delineate between these two perspectives, thereby go beyond. Further, the study aims to provide a departure from the above perspective by substantiating answers to two questions: (1) Is the expressive dimensions of the weak in low politics institutionalised? (Unlike the view of the subaltern theorists, who see it in forms of protest movements manifested in high politics, albeit sporadic, while Scott sees it as spontaneous, lacking an institutional base). The view taken in this study is yes, it is institutionalised. Therein lies the difference of this study from the above two perspectives. (2) Can one determine the effectiveness of this institutionalisation? Yes, one can. This institutionalisation, moreover, leads to activities in the terrain of low politics that has no clearly determinate end as perceived by Scott and the subalterns. When sustained, in the long run it has serious consequences for the polity itself.

Having said that, let us proceed to pick up the same tools of expression, seen time and time again, as the basis for the expressive dimensions of reaction by the weak. For one subaltern theorist,

central to the deeper enquiry of the why and how of tribal reaction is the socio-political structure in which protest manifests itself, its social and cultural (including religious) idiom and the links between any particular reaction and those that preceded it in point of time. One needs to examine more closely the relations between social superiors and inferiors as well as the ideology of these relationships. For even where the dominance of one social group over another can be explained by reference to control over land and resources, one still needs to examine its institutionalisation in social and psychological terms.<sup>4</sup>

The central focus of this study is on the social and cultural (including religious) idiom in which these hidden transcripts is embedded, especially in two institutions namely family and religion of the Mullukurumbas. To find out the

determinacy of a particular process - as in this case, the outcome of low politics of the weak - one also has to bear in mind that we are using the term weak not in an absolute sense, but in a relative sense. Hence, the weak never 'lose hope' in political terms, nor should any study of the weak make them appear otherwise. What is latent does not become 'non-existent', in fact, it is in the latent regions of the Mullukurumbas - in the psychological realm - that the stirring of 'political aliveness' arises from.

Let us delineate between the perspectives of Scott and the Subaltern theorists and thereby provide a point of departure for future theorising. The Mullukurumbas exhibit the subaltern theorists observation of 'not seeing themselves without power'<sup>5</sup> yet 'stopping well short of outright collective defiance'<sup>6</sup> that Scott sees in his peasants of Sedaka. Weak then, it appears here, is a fluid categorisation, that though it (1) requires constant exposition of what it means to the group, vis-a-vis the outsiders and (2) is revealed in the forms of actions that follow, it goes beyond the view of these two perspectives. In this study, it is a state of mind, as well as a state of external condition, as exhibited by the Mullukurumbas, where one comforts one self with the other. Yet, the effect of it on the social plane is far reaching. Focused against the society at large, as well as the state and the strong it is to 'disconcert' them.

For Scott,

it is a passive resistance not expressed as open defiance and hence nearly unbeatable. However these Brechtian forms of class struggle have certain features in common. They require no co-ordination or planning. They often represent a form of individual self help and they typically avoid any direct symbolic confrontation with authority and with elite norms.<sup>7</sup>

This disconcerting response of the weak which includes 'self help,' but goes beyond it, hangs together bounded by a stronger tie than class. The Mullukurumbas though performing activities that resemble peasants position themselves in this four pronged protagonists interaction in a more attention demanding way. Though co-ordination and planning is observable in class terms, yet, the real solidarity is as the weak. The identity of the Mullukurumbas and the identity of weak merge together to create this 'groupness'. One is weak, because one is a Mullukurumba. Yet, one does not throw away one's 'Mullukurumbanness', but holds it tighter, to interact and disconcert the other protagonist. The responses described by the subaltern theorists, as well as Scott, namely, the 'open confrontation of the state'<sup>8</sup> nor 'passive resistance'<sup>9</sup>, respectively, never materialises, with regard to the Mullukurumbas. Instead, what takes place is a surreal merging with the scene, as it were, enclosed by the solidarity of the tribal group. The disconcerting response of the weak becomes noticeable only when the state, society and strong 'deprotagonise' themselves. Deprotagonise in the sense of refusing to believe in the meanings they thrust on to the actions of the Mullukurumbas, based on the premise of a placid weak.

#### **Family and religion; the institutional base of low politics.**

Having stretched the parameter of weakness, let us now look at the political behaviour of the weak. The aim here is to analyze this 'surreal merging with the scene' response of the weak with its effectiveness in regaining valued means - land, money and identity - denied in high politics. The political behaviour that helps to regain this is embedded within the institutions of religion and

family. For Barnes,

Political behaviour is intimately bound up with actions that are aimed at other non-political ends and can be isolated from these other aspects only analytically, not in terms of space, time or personnel. . . . These political processes are carried on within an instructional framework intended for some other purpose, such as the cult of the ancestors . . . or they cut across the institutional division of society and succeed because relationships established in one context are utilised in another. . . . For example, marriage, power of the curse, ancestral spirits, witch craft are used for alternate explanations and reinterpretation which can be associated predominantly with tension.<sup>10</sup>

Family and religion, in this study, serve as the institutions within which such instructions that add political messages along with non-political rituals, are embedded. What these institutions of family and religion do for the Mullukurumbas is to break down the message, of what is happening as a result of change from outside forces, into digestible bits of instruction. Among other things, it specifies the form low politics should take. This inner restructuring when it comes out and expressed as reaction can be seen and analyzed. What is focused on in this study therefore are (1) how the family regroups itself (2) how religion is a base for interpreting change and focus the reaction of the weak (3) how the valued means - land, money and identity are acquired, conserved and increased and (4) what resources are expended to achieve the same.

#### **Hidden transcripts as abusive reaction.**

Let us now turn to the actual, visible, behavioural responses of the Mullukurumbas. As mentioned earlier, a kind of Gresham's law operates, meaning, the perceived dirty and effective acts of the strong, the state and the

society has to be returned with similar dirty and effective acts by the Mullukurumbas. The rules that lie underneath these acts are discussed later, but for the present, one agrees with F.G. Bailey that such rules are indeed 'moral, jural, technical, pragmatic and have a regularity.'<sup>11</sup> The competition for valued means, which in high politics leads to external ordering, external accountability and gain accruing to external actors is in low politics internally ordered, internally accountable and expected to lead to internal actors - the Mullukurumbas - gaining at the expense of the state, society and the strong. The acts, as mentioned earlier, are not openly subversive, confrontational and direct encountering of the other protagonists nor passive resistance but a surreal merging with the scene. A menagerie of responses, which have been observed by the Subaltern theorists, as well as Scott, was observable in Nilgiris too, along with some more. Randomly mentioned at this point, they include selling of 'development' goods, burning of the forest floor, witch craft, sorcery, smuggling of forest produce, aiding inter-state smuggling, movement of residence, prostitution, arson, stealing, holding back water to other's fields, vandalism and supposedly harmless acts such as sharing a jibe or a joke or gossip and spreading of rumour about others.

As mentioned earlier, the intention of this study is not to prove that such 'reactions' exist, but to go beyond and find answers to two questions (1) Is the expressive dimension of such low politics institutionalised ? and (2) can one determine its consequences on the polity itself ? To answer question (1) one needs to analyze some of the activities of the Mullukurumbas mentioned above, pick up the underlying conceptualisation of weakness and note how the

institutions of family and religion, serve as bulwarks for the activities of Mullukurumbas in low politics.

### **Mullukurumbas and the state.**

The first set of acts can be broadly classified as the 'milking of the state.' The state in its role of 'development' provides a host of welfare benefits. In the case of tribal people such as the Mullukurumbas it includes among other privileges, employment in government institutions. Benefits acquire a different meaning that goes beyond 'a safety net' and become as in the terminology of Kirk Mann a 'feather bed.'<sup>12</sup> In other words, a self help mentality comes into vogue. The reasons become obvious, as one analyses the following examples drawn from observations made during the field trip to the Mullukurumba villages, in Nilgiris.

On day one of the visit to the village of Erumad, Mullukurumba X1 was working out ways to draw money from the state as reimbursement for his wife's medical bill. (Mullukurumba X1 was a government employee). His wife however was not ill prior to this application being made. Mullukurumba X1 confirmed that it was a false claim. There was an open discussion of whose name was to be used for drawing the amount - father, mother or wife of Mullukurumba X1. After some serious as well as humorous banter about the fact that both the parents of Mullukurumba X1 had died, the wife's name was used to apply for the same.<sup>13</sup>

On day two, Mullukurumba X1 was working out a reimbursement application, this time for a travel allowance. The institution that he was working in had deputed him to go to Ootacamund town to purchase items necessary for

a puja celebration. The actual fare and transportation costs were fudged, discussion preceded writing and vouchers were made up. This was not a behaviour unique to Mullukurumba X1 alone. His brother, who was working in the State Bank of India and now living in the town, had taken a loan for Rs 20,000. It was used to bribe a member of the State Legislative Assembly in order to get the job Mullukurumba X2 was working in now. 'It was a government job' and hence, 'it was worth it', according to Mullukurumba X2. It was seen as such for (a) a government job was in many ways 'priceless' and (b) 'even though obtainable only through a bribe, one could break even within a years time'.

This above example shows that the actions of the Mullukurumbas go far beyond survival strategies, where the term encompasses responses to structurally engendered conditions of deprivation. It reflects an effective outcome of a determination, to chalk out a place in the social transformation under way in Nilgiris. This example shows how the identity of the weak is used to gain access to the key source of contemporary political power: acquiring valued means. It is in that context that 'milking the state' was a well known method to be adopted, for it was a another source of income. It is more than making a quick buck out of a particular opportunity, but in reality, in a well hidden and garbled vocabulary, communicating to the other protagonists their capriciousness. It becomes an alternate channel of social and economic mobility.

It was obvious that the state was to be 'milked'. There was no perception of 'immoral cunning' by other Mullukurumbas of Mullukurumba X1's behaviour. In fact, among the Mullukurumbas, the young men who work in government jobs are considered to be among the most eligible bachelors by the bride's family,

primarily because of the jobs they hold. This reflects a way of looking at life, a world view, which Mullukurumbas take; what should be done or not done ought to be 'legitimately fit'. In this case it was.

The justification arises from a common feeling of being undermined by the state. Every time one questioned them about this particular aspect, the Mullukurumbas reiterated that the 'state has and is taking too much from them and when the strong can be so immoral, surely the weak cannot be blamed as being wrong.' Apart from this justification by the group, also noticeable was the use of a kinship structure, to provide for not only a highly persuasive line of communication between kinsfolk in the home and the new community. For example, in the case of the brother of Mullukurumba X2 who channels information about available job opportunities, similar to what E.M. Rogers mentions in his book, *diffusion of innovations*.<sup>14</sup> Behind this is 'familism'<sup>15</sup> serving as a unit to acquire valued means. The fall out of this, explained elsewhere, is seen as a respectability of the family. The effect of this spreads to the tribal group as a whole.

Development' programmes need to be looked at next. Whether it is land or a new block of houses or inputs such as seeds and fertilisers, relief goods like blankets and mattresses during the rainy season, the Mullukurumbas do not see them as something meant genuinely for their development. It is usually an "input" to be later sold. This tendency to sell what is meant as development inputs may appear to be a result of deprivation. From observing them closer, one notices that it is a definite refusal to place the value of development on such inputs. By selling them, it becomes a bargain in the true sense of the term for the



Mullukurumbas. Even as they do this, they make obvious their willingness to abide by the larger rule that is beneficial to them; taking what is available to them, yet, careful to hold on to the freedom to modify the inner style of functioning so as to suit themselves. In other words, they sell that which is unwanted.

When seen from this perspective, state funds being used to build a block of houses for the Mullukurumbas seem misdirected. Apart from the fundamental difference in defining domestic space, another peculiar practice seems to repetitively occur in Nilgiris. Development housing projects result in houses being built in places where there is a high risk of it being flooded, burnt or destroyed through natural calamities. One Mullukurumba pointed out that by such an occurrence, 'more money can be spent by the state'. For him it meant, scope for money to be appropriated by contractors who have been given contracts in the first place through nepotism or bribery and the official and politician who gets the same.

The larger picture emerges; the total neglect or refusal by the strong to see development of the Mullukurumbas as such. Also, an agreed end that would solve whatever discomfort housing means to the Mullukurumbas. For one official in the Public Works Department in Nilgiris, 'housing projects for tribal people' is carried out without finding a conclusive end to it. This provides scope for the strong, to argue for development projects. They cleverly highlight their efforts as being carried out against tremendous odds to shield the so called poor tribal people from discomfort, thereby justifying their role'. However behind the scene, the strong push out anyone who really wants to solve the problem. For the

strong, it is as important not to get the ignorant tribal people to develop, as much as, not to lose the opportunity to make the most of the scope offered by the prevailing ethos of development.

For the Mullukurumbas, these development inputs are another source of income. There is a sense of cynicism about 'development', how this 'package' is formed and where it comes from. The so called weak, ignorant tribal people, the Mullukurumbas, know that they can make their bit from this parody of development. When the blankets and the mattresses, the goats and the seeds and fertilisers . . . handed out as development inputs for the Mullukurumbas turn out in the market the week after . . . the assumption that Mullukurumbas are doing it solely out of a desperation appears questionable.

Going over to another example, namely forest fires, almost every night one invariably comes across a thin line of fire amidst the forests, usually on the slopes of hills away from the villages. On questioning the Mullukurumbas, one said, 'they are usually started off by somebody trying to keep warm at night'. Others added, 'such fires are not harmful as the fire gets put out by the early morning dew'. One other Mullukurumba said, 'using forest fires is one way of catching small forest animals'. On the other hand, the forest officials saw forest fires differently. For them, forest fires is a deliberate 'reaction' of the tribal people for some punitive action on the part of the forest officials. 'Forest fires are a menace', Forest Officer N. Ramkumar working at the Mudumalai Wild life sanctuary said.

It is deliberately planned and carried out by the tribal people. and it is dangerous. One such forest fire partially destroyed the National wild life park at Mudumalai not far away from Gudalur some years ago. Though the Mullukurumbas were not implicated in

that incident Mullukurumbas have been fined and arrested for setting fire to forests innumerable times in the past.<sup>16</sup>

Disagreement is not expressed openly but in such covert ways. The direction taken is by a lengthy attrition, to nibble away at the bases of the state of which forests are one.

What do the above three examples - the milking of the state, the development inputs and the forest fires - suggest ? First of all, they reveal how Mullukurumbas, by their perceptiveness have come to a conclusion on what is happening to them. Also, what reaction is 'legitimate fit' under the circumstances. Noticeable in the above examples is the feature of not going against the state, the strong or the society in an open, defiant manner, but choosing those grey areas that the strong themselves trespass with much greater impunity. In these three examples, it is the state that pays for the consequences.

#### **Mullukurumba and the strong.**

Let us now turn to the examples of how the strong are used by the weak Mullukurumbas. The characteristic feature of these examples is the 'communication' itself. It is an almost silent lamb to the slaughter, sense of humbleness which is observable from their body posture and tonal message. It almost verges on saying 'yes' to the strong before the question is asked. The emphasis is not on what is communicated to the weak, but, on the Mullukurumbas trying to communicate to the strong that they are not against the strong. Further, the weak wish to make this clear to the strong that they have no ambitions similar to them. Finally, in no way are the strong made to imagine

that the weak would ever be a source of competition.

Behind the scenes though the game is played differently. The Mullukurumba conveys the communicated message which did not seem vitally important during the conversation and was so emphatically assented to, to another strong and by creating the resultant stand-off between the two, create a way towards the attainment of their goal. It is a classic example of how the weak achieve success by (a) appearing impotent of any rivalry to the authority and (b) having exceptionally good knowledge of where the two authorities would stand-off against each other, without being able to independently clarify the problem involving the weak.

Compare this with the 'damned-if-you-do-and-damned-if-you-don't' philosophy of the strong. The weak use their vulnerable image as a cover against the strong. At a surface level, it appears that if the weak cannot beat the strong, they follow them. What however is more closer to the truth is a well judged assessment of the strong. Added to this is the knowledge of what one can get from whom and yet submerge ones intention in a certain ambiguousness.

This is seen vividly especially in the relationship of the Mullukurumbas with forest officials. On the same day that the forest official talked about the incidents of forest fires, he took Mullukurumba X3 aside into the nearby thickets for a long conversation. After almost an hour, the two of them returned. The forest official said that this was a usual meeting he had with tribal elders. He added that tribal people knew a lot about happenings in the forests including activities like manufacture of illicit liquor, smuggling of forest produce, poaching, growing of poppy, even murder that often occurs there'. For him, this

was one way of keeping track of the forest area he was in charge. When one tried to confirm this by eliciting facts about the conversation, Mullukurumba X3 said that it was indeed true. He was an 'informer' to the forest official, he said, because 'the forest official had agreed to allow him to continue cultivation in a plot of land within the confines of the reserved forest'. He also added, 'One needs to be very careful about what one says, for one never can tell when these officials will turn around and throw sand in the stomach. They are as dangerous as elephants in heat.'<sup>17</sup> The next day, a trip with Mullukurumba X3 revealed this gifted plot of land where he had grown sesame seeds and some varieties of beans. It was more than a two hour trek from the village of Cherumulli where Mullukurumba X3 had his own plot of land.

En route to the plot of land Mullukurumba X3 took a detour from the path through the jungle to pick up a gun from the undergrowth with which he shot birds. He said, 'it is illegal to have the gun and so is hid in the forest. The rifle is never taken into the village'. On returning back in the evening he duly deposited it some yards away from the path, before we emerged out of the forests. To one observing the behaviour of the Mullukurumba, within the precincts of the forests, the image of weakness seemed to be false. While forest officials depend on the tribal people for so many of their needs yet the Mullukurumbas maintain a facade of cringing behaviour before them.

By redirecting the focus of reaction, they by compromise transact with the strong. It helps them to derive substantial returns at the level of low politics. By riding on the strong without forcing any discernable discomfiture, they make a gain at the others expense without visibly disturbing the apparent permanence

of the status quo. It is based on evaluation and reflection of their relative standing with others and working out a political behaviour that would give them the best possible returns in a loss - gain calculation. It is politics worked out in terms of here and now in the pragmatic, 'what is possible now' sense.

#### **Mullukurumba and the society.**

Looking at the expressive dimensions of low politics, the most vivid example with regard to the Mullukurumbas' relationship to society is as follows. This example reflects the fact that not all of politics is rational or purely secular. Here, witchcraft was used as a tool of evicting squatters of tribal land. As mentioned in an earlier chapter, the Mullukurumbas throughout recorded history have been well known for their witch craft. In the village of Moonanad, Mullukurumba X4 took the researcher to a piece of land that was fallow. He described it as a testament to all those non-tribal people from across the border who plan to take away Mullukurumba land. The Keralite who had cheated a Mullukurumba of this land 'for a bottle of liquor' and had started cultivating it, had died suddenly. Mullukurumba X4 made it appear gruesome and gory which this researcher found was a bit exaggerated, but accepted it as such because the exaggeration was part of the message, the need for it to be taken seriously and by that, take Mullukurumbas seriously. When the researcher tried to corroborate the facts, different dates and different identity of the Keralite were given, but the message was clear. 'Do not cheat the Mullukurumbas and take their land, if one does that, the consequences would be the same'.

Similar to this was another example, where the researcher met a non-tribal, once again a Keralite, who had bought a plot of land, albeit not from the

Mullukurumbas, but from the government. He had a fake 'patta' - land right - authenticating his domicile status as a resident of Gudalur and hence, a right to land distributed by the government to scheduled tribes. He had entered into an altercation with one of the Mullukurumbas over watering of his fields. The result was the planting of 'stones' by the Mullukurumbas 'blessed by the spirits' in his land. He believes that it would result in bad crops or a very low yield. He had removed four of them through ploughing and extensive digging. 'Yet', he added, 'one can never be sure if there was another one'. He was sure that if there was one, his bullocks would die and his family cursed.

Here from these instances one can see the inert expressions of the Mullukurumbas to ward off social transformation that was and is unfair to them. The above evidences are proof that the Mullukurumbas are able to get at least part of what they want through low politics. It is a more effective way of conveying to the society, in an idiom that would be taken more seriously than perhaps picketing the taluk office. For Scott,

witchcraft is in many respects, the classical resort of vulnerable subordinate groups who have little or no say open opportunity to challenge a form of domination that angers them.<sup>18</sup>

These examples used so far involve what appears to be individual self help where the Mullukurumbas have worked on a one to one level, to acquire valued means - land and money. These expressive dimensions of low politics do appear so, in the superficial sense. However, gossip and rumour reveal deeper ties. An obvious core of rumours observed among the Mullukurumbas is a sense of being annihilated. One example, that appears bizarre, yet, seemed very real to the participants in the conversation is as follows.

Mullukurumba X5, a nineteen year old youth, a smoker, said this while talking to a group of four other Mullukurumbas, "The new government in Delhi has decided to reduce the population drastically and as a result has added certain chemicals in cigarettes that makes smokers below the age of twenty five gradually impotent and finally die." Initially, a persecution complex seemed to have been turned on to the Mullukurumba X5, who went on to admit that it was impossible for him to stop smoking, in spite of the governmental measure. The conversation took a different turn, as the issue was turned around by the others and questioned on the basis of what the consequence would be to the Mullukurumbas as a whole. One Mullukurumba said that "this was a measure taken against all people not living in the cities." Another said. that "non-Mullukurumbas wanted to take away Mullukurumba women and thus destroy their community." A third Mullukurumba jocularly said that, "we could all go up in smoke." When this researcher interjected by saying that such things, as this rumour suggests, do not happen, they laughed and with a sense of surprise seemed to say 'how can you be so naive'? <sup>19</sup>

Another rumour, that ought to be mentioned, is the planned and deliberate killing of Mullukurumbas by doctors at the local general Hospital. A Doctor working at the General Hospital in Ootacamund had told this researcher earlier that, 'AIDS is a disease that is rapidly acquiring epidemic proportions among the tribal people in Gudalur'. He added that, 'in the Ootacamund general Hospital as well as in most other Government Hospitals in the state of Tamilnadu,' there was an, 'unspoken rule not to publicise the fact that there was to be a special ward for victims of AIDS'. 'The quota of beds allotted for this are always full'. When



questioned about the treatment procedure, Dr. R.Gunachandar said,

We do not worry about those who already have this disease, what is not mentioned is that anybody coming to our Government hospitals for treatment has a high percentage rate of risk in acquiring the same. Government hospitals have become centres for the spread of AIDS.

His explanation for the same, was the following,

The people who come to a general Hospital for treatment were the ones who cannot afford treatment and care in private hospitals. The Government hospitals do not have enough funds either. In this situation, the only way out from AIDS being transmitted would be to use disposable syringes. It would cost at least Rs 1.25 every time a patient is injected. Tell me, do you think these poor people can afford that ? <sup>20</sup>

AIDS to the Mullukurumbas is seen as a disease that came from the 'North', now 'stored in Government hospitals' and 'given to all tribal people to speed up their death so that all these lands can be taken up by the Government'. When one talked about disposable syringes and an effort made to explain the cause of the disease once again the same derision was obvious.

It was obvious, from these rumours, that the Mullukurumbas were expressing a value ignored by others, a value that was and is fundamental to the Mullukurumbas - their Mullukurumbanness. Apart from rumour forming a mode of speaking out and expressing opinions, in these rumours lie an obsession with the idea of an irreversible and destructive change taking place among themselves. It also expresses a distrust of the 'others', and their intentions for the wellbeing of the Mullukurumbas, thereby reflecting a resentment against the other. For Scott,

the key fact is that the process of embellishment and exaggeration is not at all random. As a rumour travels, it is altered in a fashion that brings it more closely into line with the hopes, fears and world view of those who hear it and retell it'.<sup>21</sup>

These hidden transcripts reveal through their different manifestations, the dissent of the Mullukurumbas to what is perceived as injustice. Compared with the mode of addressing injustice, taken by the counter-elites, for the weak, these activities are far from effective. Also, as a result, the weak see it as a 'legitimate fit'.

With regard to the objective of this study, the aim is to go further than the perception of Scott, who sees in these acts a certain spontaneity that lacks planning and organisation. The view taken in this study is that these hidden transcripts are institutionalised on the bed-rock of the family and religion of the Mullukurumbas. And, far more importantly, they use these institutions to provide the base, not for a foray into high politics, which the subalterns have observed, but use it to nibble at, in a far less direct, and therefore a subtle but shrewd manner, the base of the other protagonists; the state, society and the strong. In doing this, low politics provides returns for the weak that has far reaching consequences for the polity as a whole. These examples reveal that Mullukurumbas do not live in isolation or merely subject to external influences. They are responsive, reacting to these external influences and leaving an impact on them instead. The adversarial posture adopted by the state, society and the strong is defused in the terrain of low politics. Low politics provides the terrain for the weak to work out a give and take with the strong, compromise with society and thereby use vital resources which the state has control of, through power sharing born of competition and cooperation. They use a repertoire that is based on selective use of traditional and modern tools of bargaining and manoeuvre.

### **Low politics and institutionalised response of the weak.**

The expressive dimension of low politics is institutionalised in the familial and religious practices and rituals of the Mullukurumbas. Before one analyses that, a point needs to be mentioned. The observations carried out during the course of this study does not reflect the image of a well organised Mullukurumbas. Yet, it is obvious that they are ones who know all too clearly how to regain through such outlets in low politics what they lost in high politics. Low politics and its expressive dimensions basically appears to be an outlet for the Mullukurumbas in some ways to make an attempt to regain their equilibrium. This regaining of equilibrium takes many forms. In its benign forms, activities directed towards this particular intention of regaining their equilibrium is veiled in the form of proverbs, jokes, anecdotes, legends, in catch words on walls, stones and trees as well as folk tale. All these are primarily meant for internal consumption. In its malignant forms, it leads to an expression of bottled up aggression, well hidden and directed. The disconcerting response of the Mullukurumbas become vivid. Reaction seems to move beyond the level of self help.

One is in agreement with Henry Volken, Ajoy Kumar and Sara Kaithathara that

compelled to live in submission to the mighty they tend to express their resentment or aggression against their own people resulting in fighting and wife beating.<sup>22</sup>

Self abuse, such as those observed among the Mullukurumbas include excessive drinking, under eating, prostitution, along with in-fighting and wife beating. All these reflect, in part, a reaction to the external problem of change

that is unfavourable to them. These examples, express the motive of seeking in some way to regain an equilibrium, though justified not as a 'preference for' which makes them do the above acts, but, as a social fact that is externally driven creating the need to do so. It is here, in this gulf between 'abusing the system that abuses you' and 'self abuse', that determinacy of the 'effectiveness of low politics of the Mullukurumbas' lie, as much as the over powering impact of the other protagonists - the state, society and the strong, in high politics.

#### **Existence rationality as a framework that structures expression of the weak.**

Further, the expressive dimensions of low politics, its actual behaviour and its institutionalisation in the family and religious life of the Mullukurumbas is derived from the rationale of 'existence rationality'. Denis Goulet and Marco Walshok use this term in their study on the gypsies in Europe. Their theoretical perception of this phenomena has been acknowledged to come from Harold Garfunkel. For Denis Goulet and Marco Walshok, 'existence rationality' means among other things,

an attractive alternative . . . to allow gypsies to react constructively to the injustice and the contempt they receive.' Existence rationality designates the ability to develop strategies to attain goals and to choose between different ends within the limits of given existential conditions.<sup>23</sup>

Here existence rationality is not totally different from mental patterns including that postulated by Banfield in his, 'Moral basis of a backward society'. Amoral familism as the prevailing ethos of the inhabitants of a small village in southern Italy where 'one finds solidarity and moral accountability within the confines of kin relationships and indifference or hostility beyond the pale'.<sup>24</sup>

Existence rationality here in this study, referring to the Mullukurumbas, is more closer to amoral tribalism than familism of Banfield, yet not altogether devoid of familism. When one takes the family of the Mullukurumbas as a unit one notices amoral familism and when one takes up religion of the Mullukurumbas for analysis, one notices amoral tribalism. Either way, existence rationality encompasses both forms of amoralism. Also, since one aims to look at institutionalisation of low politics and its behaviour, the aim is to describe the inner mechanism of existence rationality than attempt an analysis on what is more conspicuous, amoral familism or amoral tribalism.

Existence rationality, like most other terms used here, is thesis specific. It provides the pretext and rationale for what lies behind it, in the various forms of low political behaviour. Through it, the Mullukurumbas aim to acquire, conserve and increase valued means - land, money and identity and thereby address the imbalance that differentiates themselves from the other protagonists. In the process, they also justify their acts. Existence rationality in that sense allows reaction to the consequences of social transformation forced upon the Mullukurumbas from outside to be constructed and rationalised within a specific framework. Here the significant actors, the Mullukurumbas, see oneself and one's group become endowed with an identity of weakness. By holding on to that the Mullukurumbas rework in their individual as well as in the mind of the group, alterations to oneself, as much as attempting to re-alter and externally introduced change in their favour.

Existence rationality then has a sense of innovativeness in-built in it; innovativeness in reasoning to the point of imagining. It resembles the act of

picking up little pieces of facts, sticking them on to one's mind, drawing pictures around them, colouring them with their own coded crayons and persisting with it, until they find resistance in the form of anything unpleasant. Existence rationality and its resultant innovativeness is to take such reasoning for granted, that little pieces of fact and their own contribution around it are one and the same. However, this imagination is not fertile in the disastrous sense, though it seems to lack objectivity. It cannot be attributed to laziness to think factually, or naive imagination, but, a certain meaningful deliberateness within a framework that explains every event in their individual and group's lives and history respectively.

#### **Parallel slotting and shared consciousness.**

This kind of rationalisation can be termed as parallel slotting. It is a wilful tendency to see things and people as they would like to see it, rather than, as it should be seen, and in the process see themselves in a particular way. How does parallel slotting fit into the institutionalised existence rationality of the Mullukurumbas? To begin with parallel slotting need to be explained with a series of examples. (1) Taking the same incident of AIDS and government hospitals described earlier: for the Mullukurumbas 'it is a disease stored in government hospitals and given to all tribal people to speed up their death, so that all these lands can be taken up by the government.'(2) In the context of deforestation and large scale increase of plantations, for one Mullukurumba, 'this change from forests to plantations is to make the Mullukurumbas slave labourers, who will finally end

up as bonded labourers.' (3) With regard to education and free lunch for children through the 'Chief Minister's Nutritious Noon Meal Scheme', the view taken is, 'this is another way of enticing the children away from parents and thereby destroy the Mullukurumba way of life.'<sup>25</sup>

Here, in example (1) to receive treatment from the government hospital for a cure was 'parallel slotted' as receiving a 'curse of death'. In example (2) an opportunity to work in a plantation, was 'parallel slotted' as losing ones freedom and becoming a slave. In example (3) instead of seeing it as incentive for attending school, it was parallel slotted as being an enticement to rebel and destroy the Mullukurumba way of life.

Parallel slotting has a certain 'hypocrisy' attached to it. It reveals a cleft between 'action' and 'perception'. Yet, that is the very parenthesis that parallel slotting aims to convey. More significantly, intertwined in the act is an existence rationality, an amoral behaviour, while a sense of being undermined, a sense of injustice is constantly intertwined in the perception. Secondly, while the 'act' of Mullukurumbas appear individualised, the perception underlying it becomes institutionalised.

The sense of being undermined, the sense of injustice among other similar conceptualisations become shared. The consciousness of group and the identity of weakness coalesce with this 'shared conceptualisation' of being betrayed, undermined and persecuted, among others. It is this 'substance' that is constructed and rationalised' within the framework of existence rationality mentioned earlier. The aim of this rationale - existence rationality - is to acquire, conserve and increase valued means, while the source of sustenance and

'energy' fuelling this substance enclosed within the framework of existence rationality, springs from the institutions of Mullukurumba religion and family.

### **The utility of amoral familism and tribalism.**

At the cost of repetition, this researcher returns to the point made earlier in this chapter. Family and religion serve as the institutions within which instructions that add political messages along with political rituals are provided. What these institutions of family and religion do to the weak - the Mullukurumbas - is to break down the message of what is 'happening' as a result of change from outside forces, into instructionally digestible bits that, among others, specify the form that low politics should take.

Having looked at some of the actual, visible, behavioural responses of the Mullukurumbas in the arena of low politics, this researcher wishes to look at the institutions of family and religion and bring out their link with power sharing in Nilgiris. By doing so, this researcher wishes to convey the point, that what seems on the surface as spontaneous, 'making a quick buck' out of the state, society and the strong in the arena of low politics, is internalised in the minds of the Mullukurumbas in more substantial terms.

The political message of the institutions of religion and family in deep socio-psychological ways is to protect the 'human' I of the individual Mullukurumbas from the significant 'others' - the state, the strong and the society - outside, and by doing so sustain the belief of retrieving order in one's favour. For which, boundaries are created, values, structures, order, standards are maintained, mind sustaining functions in the form of myths, habits come into



existence.

In real terms, an individual within this existence rationality is constantly switching from his particular acts and the particular perception that the institutions provide him and vice versa. As a result, the external world of the strong, the state and society is allowed 'in' only in these terms. For the individual relies on the institutions of family and religion to give meaning, to create not only ways of reasoning but also an attitude. The Mullukurumba is rather wholly individualistic and thus spontaneous or sporadic in his reactions nor does he lose himself within the larger pan - tribal identity and thus become part of a larger, externally directed movement. Instead, the Mullukurumba flip-flops from act to perception and vice versa, from the outside world of the strong, state and society to the inner world of institutions of family and religion and vice versa, always staying within the framework of existence rationality.

### **The family.**

The scattering of settlements as well as the overall breaking down of the erstwhile Mullukurumba community into the three groups mentioned earlier, Mullukurumbas MK1, MK2 and MK3 as a result of social transformation from outside is true. One has to go further and state that it has resulted in the family in contemporary times, becoming the lynch pin in perception formation. This is because it re-knits individuals closely in a new formation serving the purpose of a more effective social interaction. As mentioned earlier, the impression of Mullukurumbas as hunter-gatherers is no longer valid. The Mullukurumbas of the present day are wage labourers diversely occupied, ranging from a career in

government offices to working in plantations. The past form of life usually described as 'in themselves for themselves' has been replaced by a struggle to balance 'in themselves for others' and 'for themselves in others'.

Social transformation has forced individual Mullukurumbas not only to cluster around niches available in the social environment but also made them see that clustering in a particular manner is advantageous. The Mullukurumbas have realised that rearrangement is beneficial and more favourable when the family becomes the clustering unit rather than the group. In practical terms the family slims down the Mullukurumbas 'social width' in terms of immediate giving and also helps to balance between tradition and modernity - the tribalness of the group's past and the hinduness of the larger groups around them.

It appears that the pre-colonial group of the Mullukurumbas was based not on an atavistic tendency to live in such. It ought to have served the purpose of being useful and progressive, a socio-political category that corresponded to the origins and development of unifying community formation at that time. It is in the same nature of adjusting to the constricting limits of the present that we ought to see familism among the Mullukurumbas. To see the Mullukurumbas stereotyped as 'belonging to' tribes is a false assumption that persists from the past view of the colonial anthropologists as in the case of the misnomer that pre-colonial Africans belonged to tribes.<sup>26</sup> In other words, the Mullukurumbas are taking their families far more seriously than their tribal group, as an institution, so as to help themselves address the issue of change. Families are emerging as structures supporting the activities of the Mullukurumbas in the terrain of low politics. The highly visible group and the usually assumed political responses of

tribal people as composite social categories within which unified, non-variant political processes arise from is no longer valid. The family, as in the case of the Mullukurumbas, has become a neo-political institutional category.

Familism among the Mullukurumbas in the present day reflects partly the failure of the state to provide security for the individual. Familism is also a response to the violation of the 'tribalness' by the state, making it rapidly obsolete as an effective construction for acquiring ones valued interests. The Mullukurumbas see in it the incapacity of large groups based on mass identities, to serve as effective political structures. Large scale political processes and Movements therefore do not readily emerge because of the belief among the Mullukurumbas that they come to no good, when compared to the effectiveness of the slimmed down social group - the family. It is here, in the family, that the seeds of enmity towards the state are sown and grow from. Familism, thus institutionally organised, has an indirect impact on the longevity of the state. The impact is contained partly by the cross cutting conflicts of the strong, the state and society apart from the weak. The cross cutting nature of these conflicts helps to make the weak less frantic and hence bridle the subversiveness of 'familism' into a source of self defense. This makes it imperative to analyze the institution of family in the case of the Mullukurumbas.

#### **Family and perception formation.**

The family is looked as an institution that helps in perception formation thus fuelling the existence rationality of the Mullukurumbas. In order to analyze this feature of the family, it needs to be placed alongside the Government

schools and the religious institution of the Mullukurumbas. It is obvious that government schools and the religious institution of the Mullukurumbas do not teach the same, conclusive world view, but, on the other hand, mutually incompatible and inconclusive world views. It is here in the spaces created by the above, that the family serves in perception formation; usually comprising a history of ones immediate family and groups past injustice.

Building on Edward Shils' model of an 'atryptich tradition', it appears that the space created by the mutual incompatibilities of the state and the tribal society through its proxies the school and the religious institution of the Mullukurumbas is filled by the family's own perception. But one sees in the Mullukurumbas, the family filling, not a tradition - a noumenal past - which is gradually being lost sight of, but injustice from a perceived past. This repressed injustice, which is recent and a filled in sense of injustice, comes out against the outsider - the state, society and the strong.

The role of the family does not end there. One more contradiction is sorted out by it. Family also makes a choice between the two mentioned in the earlier chapters. The institution of family of the Mullukurumbas makes this judgement on a simple criteria of observing the proxies of the state and society; the schools and temples respectively. In Nilgiris, it is very often the school that comes into conflict with the identity of the tribal people, the Mullukurumbas, rather than the Hindu orthopraxy which allows room for the incorporation of tribal gods and rituals thus making the Mullukurumbas appear part of a larger entity. The state fails to create that identity through the schools in actual terms, it only widens the reality of the non partaking Mullukurumbas as being illiterate

and incomplete. The family immediately becomes anti-school and by that score, in the larger context, anti-state. It serves to overcome the real confusion of the Mullukurumbas being classified as an inferior person, apart from not finding in the school a semblance of anything pro-Mullukurumba.

When one looks at the larger state - society conflict in Nilgiris, it becomes clear why the Mullukurumbas look at the school as a facade of the state and thereby merely a source of economic gain of the short term kind. The society sees in this exercise of the state, a dull half-hearted effort by the school teacher, who, day in and day out, fails to bridge the incompatible and inconclusive world views, always leaving space for the family to fill up the injustice from a perceived past.

Getting back to the analysis of the Mullukurumba family, one notices that the conditions of the past as well as the structure of the family itself, gives rise to this particular mode of perception formation. Two specific features of the contemporary Mullukurumba family life are in place here; (a) 'the pivot turn' phenomenon and (b) 'picking oneself up by the bootstraps' phenomenon. They make obvious why the family is important in the particular kind of perception formation discussed earlier.

**(The 'pivot-turn' phenomenon).**

The need to see land, money and identity as valued means and hence make social life a struggle for it, has conditioned the need for Mullukurumbas to use the family as a lynch pin for change. Therefore, one contemporary neo-rite of passage that all families undergo is the 'pivot-turn', altering irreversibly the

boundaries of ones past and present. The Mullukurumba family which has gone through this pivot turn can be generalised to appear as follows: There is an increasing availability of cash, accruing supposedly as 'income', to one member of the family - the male. It remains in his possession and is not turned over to the larger group or to any lineage authority for redistribution. The use of it or sharing is restricted to the family. The respect and authority of the male arises from the income generated and the increased ability to feed and provide for the family. There is a resultant weakening of bonding with the larger group. The family increasingly becomes the centre of identity rather than the larger group.

This pivot turn is not an easy process, it is actually an upsetting of patterns of tradition, of social relations, of personal obligations. It leads to insecurity, as well as uncertainty, drawn mainly from fear of the unknown. It increases levels of anxiety and stress. The smaller the family compared to the group prior to the pivot turn, lesser the resources and scope to counter stress of the kind forced upon them.

**(Picking up oneself by the boot straps phenomenon).**

Even as the above changes take place in the post pivot turn family, differences in the world view of the man and the woman in the family begins to appear. For a start, the man is increasingly exposed to a linear concept of time, a hierarchical view of social and material relations. The abundance or scarcity of money gives him authority and respect within the family as well as outside. For the woman, this does not readily happen. Among the Mullukurumbas, the woman see abundance and scarcity primarily in terms of supernatural causes and

believes that it can be influenced only through practices in the sacred realm.

What then appears at the surface to be a family of Mullukurumbas picking up themselves up by the boot straps is, in reality, the moving up of the man at the cost of the woman. Within the family, new rules come into effect, the men in this new construction, become the strong and the women the weak in an almost exact replica of what occurs externally and described elsewhere in this study. This study does not go into this area further except to quote Vandana Shiva, who observes the following,

the shift from Prakriti to natural resources, from mater to matter was considered (and in many quarters is still considered) a progressive shift from superstition to rationality . . . for women . . . the death of prakriti is simultaneously a beginning of their marginalisation, devaluation, displacement and ultimate indispensability.<sup>27</sup>

Having said that this researcher merely wishes to reiterate the fact that the woman is made to pay the price for the conversion of the men into the strong within the family of the neo-Mullukurumbas, so that he would be able to acquire valued means. Whatever success such a survival-strategy can bring can only be pyrrhic, for the family structure merely transfers the weak identity on to the woman, and that too subtly yet strongly. The family rapidly assumes the role of an institution that inserts its own perception formation. As mentioned earlier, the neo-Mullukurumba family fills in, not a traditional - a noumenal past - which is gradually being lost sight of, but injustice from a perceived past. This repressed injustice, which is recent and a direct outcome of change, is reflected against the outsider - the state, the society and the strong. The family served to breed sustenance for the myriad acts of low politics.

### **Spirit possession and existence rationality.**

Getting back to the neo-Mullukurumba family, three consequences are obvious results of the two phenomenon mentioned earlier. This researcher hastens to add that the consequences are not universal to all the families but universally agreed upon by the Mullukurumbas as a consequence of these two phenomenon mentioned earlier. They are alcoholism among the males and a higher percentage of spirit possession among women than men in recent years and thirdly prostitution.

It can be argued here whether the neo-group here is the family or the larger Mullukurumba tribal group. From the observation of spirit possessed women during the field trip, it was obvious that it would be a difficult question to answer. However, that is not the crucial issue, the question here is, what does possession do towards 'perception formation'? The position taken here is (a) accepting the Mullukurumbas point of view, that spirit possession among women is higher than man and is a consequence of, what in this study is described as the pivot turn phenomenon. (b) Spirit possession helps to relieve social anxiety by providing information that neutralises or eliminates negative imagination in the reality space of ones thought thus giving one the confidence to understand and control change.

Spirit possession as seen among the Mullukurumbas is to a certain extent similar to alcoholism and prostitution. It is similar in the sense that (a) it arises from a psychological deviation from a normal towards an excess and (b) it is a reflection of a struggle to cope with change. But the similarity ends there. Before one goes further, the two instances of spirit possession one observed



during the course of ones stay in the field ought to be mentioned.

The first instance was at a temple site of a local goddess Ashtalakshmi in Cherumulli. It was a Friday and one observed not only Mullukurumba families but other people as well had come over to worship. One was told that it was a favoured site for women, especially those who were barren. What was remarkable was the conspicuous role played by the women. The oracle at the temple site, when heard, was given through a woman who was spirit possessed. Every woman and family who came there had a prayer request to make, after which, a vow was made. Though one did not make a note of the requests or the vows, what was evident and specifically relevant to this research was the terms used by the oracle. It was either 'I will' or 'I will not unless' that came across repeatedly in the replies made by the oracle to the requests made. What followed the 'I will not unless' was a conglomeration of boundaries to be observed, values, structures, order and standards to be maintained and mind sustaining functions in the form of myths as well as habits to be practised.

The second instance of 'spirit possession' was a eleven year old Mullukurumba girl in Yelamalai a hamlet on the fringes of Cherangode. Goddess Ashtalakshmi once again had 'possessed' this child and the apparent cause was to convey a message to 'one of the group around her at that time' that a vow had not been fulfilled. There were over twenty four people gathered around the girl at that time, but no one publicly accepted that the message had been meant for him or her.

As mentioned earlier, it is arguable whether it is the family or the larger tribal group that the oracle aims to address, but certainly, the source of anxiety

and tension that creates conditions of 'spirit possession' is a combination of an externally induced change and the internal restructuring in the form of the 'family'. Add to this the observation that every family interviewed, had experienced a hearing of an oracle or had experienced among themselves 'spirit possession'. It was always spoken of in terms of 'perception formation' as used in this thesis, as a 'source of strength and re-establishment of oneself and one's family in a perceived battle with the non-Mullukurumba world.' It builds on an identity of weakness born out of a sense of betrayal by the others. It certainly justifies their reactive pursuits in the alternate terrain of low politics.

For Scott, it is

a kind of oblique protest that dares not speak its own name, but that is often acceded to if only because its claims are seen to emanate from a powerful spirit and not from the woman itself.<sup>28</sup>

What is most important to note in this study is that it goes further affecting amoralism, whether seen as familism or tribism. Family serves as an important and a stronger ties than class or a pan-trinal group. The bonding though a reflection of a strong and weak relationship between the man and woman becomes an institution to help Mullukurumbas address change. Family emerges as a structure supporting the activities of the Mullukurumbas in the terrain of low politics. It helps to serve as a base for coordination and planning and provides solidarity. This institution of family, through a wide range of activities focuses reaction that nibbles away at the base of the other protagonists: the state, society and the strong. To see them as mere self help is to miss the disconcerting intention of this self defensive rearrangement. The family as an institution sees to it that dissent never gets to reach the level of

organised revolution. It is not aimed to replace the system but to get the pendulum of power sharing to an equilibrium position and not begin ticking to a different beat.

While the counter-elites through the sangamam Movement aim at impersonal ties at the intermediate level of a pan-tribal identity, the family on comparison provides effective ties 'legitimate fit' for the rules of the political culture in Nilgiris. The institution of family along with religion enables to focus grievance against the 'others.' It contextualises and creates the framework within which change is understood, interpreted and justified. Family helps to historicise the past in more acceptable terms that the Mullukurumbas can relate to. It enables the portrayal of, through symbols, myths and in practice, the significance of their lifestyle. It provides a comradeship that leads to, not a spontaneous but, a sustained reaction. The valued means of politics therefore become more accessible by pursuit through the terrain of low politics within the institutionalised base of the family.

### **Religion.**

Religion is another 'institution' that serves a purpose far more than perception formation. In this section, one specific point is pursued further, namely, how the Mullukurumbas use the institution of religion 'to enhance their identity' - a valued mean - in the Nilgiris. Identity in this sense is as described in the introduction to this study, the need to be Hindu and socially respected as such. Religion among the Mullukurumbas, can be broadly divided into the 'practised behaviour' and a deeper 'faith/belief component'. (It is relevant at this

point to remind the reader about the section in chapter 2 on 'whether the Mullukurumbas are tribal'?) This researcher finds it difficult to take for granted that the Mullukurumbas do not have a 'Hindu' past for two reasons because there is no definitive account of (a) their 'hoary' past and (b) what the 'boundary line' of Hinduism is either. This study, in order to cut across the dilemma, makes the rough division in Mullukurumba religion, as mentioned above - 'practised behaviour' - and the deeper 'faith component'.)

Going further, one sees in this 'practised behaviour' the identity factor which is a valued mean - the identity of Hindu. The 'identity of Hindu' as socially accepted in Nilgiris can be encompassed by the term hinduisation. Devoid of 'belief' it only makes the socially sought after 'identity of Hindu' appear like an 'empty shell, lifeless and meaningless'. Yet, this study analyses this 'practised behaviour component without questioning the 'content of faith/belief' within. The reason becomes obvious later.

To start with, this study merely reiterates the point made by Claude Levi Strauss, who has demonstrated that

Religion is not a device by which tribesmen turn their back on reality. On the contrary it enables them to store the information about the world around them and rationalise the situations that confront them.<sup>29</sup>

Similarly, one sees in the 'faith/belief component' of the Mullukurumba religion, the stored information and rationale that Claude Levi Strauss' mentions above. Having said that one has to go to the other extreme and state that the practised behaviour seen here is to acquire the much sought after valued mean - identity in Nilgiris.

The Hindu society in Nilgiris looks at tribal people as a whole with varying degrees of condescension. In its extreme forms the alien tribal people are even seen with suspicion and scorn for their so-called 'pseudo and deviant behaviour and practices.' The antithetical concept of being a Hindu and tribal at the same time which is vividly exemplified in the religious practices of most other groups when compared with the religious practices of the Mullukurumbas reveals a void that serves as a reason for self congratulation. It does not end there, but goes beyond, to legitimately differentiate the Mullukurumbas in a superior - inferior terms. Add to this the contemporary history of social group formation in Nilgiris. As described earlier, there is no other social scaling mechanism to measure ranking of groups new to each other except this factor of identity making it a valued mean. It is not a provider of tangible benefits directly but when combined with land and money in ways uniquely formulated by the regions political culture makes it a sought after means of social recognition.

The reason why religion is used by the Mullukurumbas to serve this purpose rather than any other scaling mechanism is probably because of the scope offered by the manipulatable and flexible quality of hinduism itself. Secondly, perhaps apart from the inclusive quality of almost any practice within the cosmopolitan umbrella of hinduism there is a strong need to relate as individuals and groups not in purely material terms but also in visible terms of religious practices. Thirdly, on a different level, to be a Hindu is to make contact with the very core of Indian society and by that in the specific context of state - society conflict mentioned earlier find a solidarity against the state.

**'Pseudo-religious practices,' a dual purpose cover.**

The third point mentioned above is taken further in the context of Mullukurumbas and the specific conditions of social transformation that they encounter. There are three entities that force this social transformation on them, the strong, the state and society. Having described the role of the strong with specific reference to the state elsewhere one needs to look at this point at the simultaneous impact of the state and society on identity formation in Nilgiris and very specially on the Mullukurumbas. Both the state and society aim to lay down their own set of norms thereby off-setting one another in fundamental ways as much as cumulatively affecting the Mullukurumbas as well.

As mentioned in the section dealing with the 'family' and 'atryptich tradition', the norms of society, in the specific sense of religious practice here, is far more accommodative and psychologically makes the Mullukurumbas feel 'big' when compared to the 'existentially awesome opposite' - the state - due to its unilateral straight jacketed norms which makes the Mullukurumbas 'feel small'. The reason is partly due to, what was described earlier as the 'cosmopolitan character of Hindu society where allowance is laid for groups to fuse into the present and past. Though reinvented it need not be authenticated in any other, but parochial, pragmatic terms. Further, it is the norms of the local society that lay the ground rules for sizing up groups and coming to a conclusion rather than the state for reasons discussed earlier. The Mullukurumbas draw on these norms and thereby come to value identity as a means and work out their own social space in Nilgiris.

A digression is in place here to question the consequences of what would

be the plausible outcome of following the ground rules laid by the state in an otherwise society laid norms environment. The Mullukurumbas would among other things have had to overstretch themselves more than what they do now. The dual norms seen as practice and belief would have opened another flank facing a society which in turn would have constantly required buttressing against an overwhelming entity the society simultaneously. Instead, to draw on the norms of the society and simultaneously using the society as a buttress against the state, leaves that much scope for the innate beliefs/faith of the Mullukurumbas to be preserved. Here is once again proof of the view raised in the section dealing with state - society conflict that the state and society becoming exponentially curbed by each other, leading to politics and modern tools and techniques such as democracy used to sort out what ought to be valued resulting in identity being valued as one.

**(a) Calendar gods and valued identity.**

The institution of religious faith/belief reveal how it is used to create a socially respectable identity for the Mullukurumbas. The obvious identity that is valued is the god and goddess worshipped. It is justified by a very clever ploy on the part of the Mullukurumbas to use gods as identity factors and further, worshipping the very ones respected by others on the social plane in the context of hindu society. What one sees is a shift from spirit worshippers to textual gods and goddesses in a simplistic gamut of 'give and take' with society. Within the group the rationale is turned over to mean that gods and goddesses have reappeared in newer forms yet requiring allegiance to old forms in the absence

of which vengeance and retribution would follow.

The pantheon of socially respectable gods and goddesses can be superficially separated from the Mullukurumbas gods and goddesses purely in terms of 'show horses' and 'work horses' respectively. The first category of gods are the calendar gods while the second category of gods are much more authentic visible in their 'animistic' forms. For the Mullukurumbas, it is the second set of gods who are feared. It is from the second set of gods that the manifestations of the first set of gods have reappeared. The gods and goddesses have appeared usually in dreams and in oracles which one Mullukurumba interpreted as specifically to help the Mullukurumbas shed much of their tribal nature and become respected as hindus by the groups Mullukurumbas now rub shoulders with. It is seen as the ultimate work of gods themselves, of change engineered at the direction of the gods. To the Mullukurumbas, the gods they worship are not merely gods who protect, save, provide . . . but gods who give them an identity as well, placing them above below or on par with other groups.

Note here, the 'calendar gods category' is the religious practice end of the categorisation and the authentically visible gods in the religious belief/faith end of the spectrum. The belief/faith end of religion institution once again helps in the low politics venture of acquiring an identity which is a valued mean. This identity as suggested earlier is a shell as it were for the identity conferring gods do not build a value nor serve in building faith/belief. The Hindu gods are for external consumption. They merely serve as an expedient for the Mullukurumbas to be seen as a hindu group without leading to an interpenetration by and of other groups. In other words the loyalty factor to such Hindu gods is in reality



one dependant on convenience born of insecurity. A loyalty to gods born out of a need to acquire an identity which is valued in society. It is not a loyalty to these gods as much as requirement of identity born out of a collusion between inner fear and outer conformity with society that leads to the phenomenon.

This same strategy is seen not only in the choice of gods and goddesses worshipped to acquire an identity but in the overall practice of hinduism itself in the diligent practice of socially respectable customs recognised as such locally. Overall it appears as if the Mullukurumbas have submerged their real beliefs within a false identity which indeed they have but as Alfonso Ortiz observes in the Tewa world,

the case of the Pueblos on being forced to submit and outwardly conform became nominal catholics but took their own religion underground and have maintained it to the present day guarding their ceremonies and their inner life against the outer world.<sup>30</sup>

The authentic tribal belief/faith of the Mullukurumbas and the cosmopolitan hinduism or the popular hinduism practised in Nilgiris is not so radically contrastable as catholicism is from Pueblo beliefs, but the suggestion underlying both are the same. One takes a position against those theorists who define tribal people as becoming casteised or hinduised. They may perhaps be seeing this surface level adaptation though one still has to contend with the argument as to where the boundary of hinduism lies apart from whether the Mullukurumbas are a tribal people. In this study, one views this Hindu identity as purely a venture of the Mullukurumbas entered into for the value component attached to it. There is no question of an internal spiritual void among the Mullukurumbas that any religion, leave alone Hinduism has to fill. If for example

Islamic or Christian identity was a valued mean, there is a plausible outcome of that occurring in the same way as what is occurring now under the same accommodative conditions of social norms.

It may not be out of place to mention here that this is not a behaviour unique to the Mullukurumbas alone but perhaps is universal to the weak. For Mark Jurgensmeyer describing the Movement against untouchability in 20th century Punjab,

The frustrated British census takers wrote of the fickleness of the lower castes with respect to religion but it is not hard to recognise the evasive adoption of protective cover.<sup>31</sup>

In the present day, the Mullukurumbas are effectively making use of a larger paradox of Hinduism. Once again the character of the Janus-faced weak is revealed riding piggy back on the other protagonists, yet concealing effectively its real nature.

Having delineated between the religious practices of the Mullukurumbas that conform to hinduism and beliefs/faith that is innately unique to the Mullukurumbas, this study qualifies this delineation as the shell and inner core in a simplistic sense which is not contrastable in a more definitive terms. Yet, it is obvious from observation that it is this intangible core - the faith and hope in the Mullukurumbas gods - which pushes their very being into action. The beliefs/faith of this inner core proves that it is not a cause for a valued identity that is being fought as much as the safe guarding of one's group from the perceived ruthlessness of the non-Mullukurumba world.

**(b) The core of Mullukurumba religion and the base for existence rationality.**

Beliefs/faith of the Mullukurumbas clearly becomes the other end, the private side from which they really draw on for comfort. It is these gods who identify with the social loneliness of the Mullukurumbas who fit into their social imagery of ploughing a lonely furrow in a hostile world, lonely in the sense of being amidst others who could not or do not grasp the value, reason point of . . . who the Mullukurumbas are. It is from this private region of belief/faith that the source of sustenance and energy which fuels the substance enclosed within the framework of existence rationality comes from. The philosophy, the world view, the perception part of this existence rationality come from this institution of religion along with the family mentioned earlier.

The inner core of Mullukurumba religion, especially as seen in oracles, reveal a holding together of the group. The leadership arises from within when compared to the counter-elites who lead the sangamam from the outside, however well meaning they may be. This religious base helps to place the causative factor of the present condition of the Mullukurumbas squarely on the outsider which includes the state, society and the strong. It helps to effectively translate a social division into a political category of them and us. This religion base in classic terms fits within the idiom of the Mullukurumbas its interpretation of social justice, self reliance and self improvement. Note here that these are the very terms that the state and the counter-elites speak. While the external leadership exemplified by the developmentalist state and the counter-elites speak of empowerment of the weak through numeracy, literacy and functionality, religion suggests the use of the terrain of low politics that combines seemingly consensual ways of interaction with subtle but shrewd

methods of self help and disconcerting the state, society and the strong.

Religion along with the family by serving a weapon of the weak helps to contextualise change, uniting in the process the Mullukurumbas around certain shared values. It provides a consciousness, leading to a feeling of justification for ones behaviour based on the identity of the weak. It personalises ties. It focuses on the core issue: the weakness of the weak. These factors reveal the fact that the Mullukurumbas recognise the rules of the political culture of Nilgiris. It reflects their understanding of high politics and it's dynamics. Unlike sangamam which aims to create autonomy for tribal people so as to remove unfavourable political conditions, religion helps in facing them and persist with manoeuvring within the spaces available.

The dependence on these institutions and their modes of interaction reflects their knowledge of political reality vividly expressed by the subaltern theorists: actual rebellion and direct expression of power on the terrain of high politics is the immediate precursor of a damning restatement of hegemony by the stronger group. Therein is seen their shrewdness as political actors. What may seem as a choice-less situation is not seen by them as a constraint but as a path for sustained nibbling away at the base for the other protagonists through the use of hidden transcripts that go far beyond self help. The barging of the external world is balanced by the Mullukurumbas within the framework of existence rationality by the reinforcement from this core of beliefs. For the Mullukurumbas this is both a dynamic factor in acquiring, conserving and increasing valued means - land, money and identity as much as providing a forum for reflecting on it as is the institution of family.

## **Conclusion.**

To summarise, the institutions of family and religion serve as the bed-rock for the low politics of the weak. It provides a sustenance for the apparently innocuous and disparate activities of the Mullukurumbas. Seen from this perspective, the ingenuity of the weak is revealed: The weak as an actor who far from being decimated politically is able to use available institutions or rearrange it, thereby using a base for transacting power. This goes to prove that there is far more to the politics of the weak in India than most are willing to concede.

Here is one view. For Nirad H. Chauduri, in an industrialised India, the destruction of aboriginal life is as inevitable as the submergence of the Egyptian temples caused by the dams of the Nile. As things are going, there can be no grandeur in the primitive end. It will not be simple extinction, which is not the worst of human destinies. It is to be feared that the aboriginal's last act will be squalid instead of being tragic. What will be seen with most regret will be, not his disappearance but his enslavement and degradation'.<sup>32</sup>

Four decades after independence, the Mullukurumbas may have become weak in the parlance of Indian politics, but, far from the observation of the above writer, the squalid end predicted is certainly not the determinate end of the Mullukurumbas as seen today. Certainly in their institutions and from their adaptive stratagems, one notices greater resilience, the implications of which reach far wider than many similar writers have been willing to credit the weak with.

This study proves that the Mullukurumbas effectively determine as much as they are being determined of their place in the social transformation in

Nilgiris. Though the parameters of analyzing change suggests 'poverty' and 'exploitation' as by words of the weak in Indian politics, it becomes obvious that these identity tags by themselves serve to hide an actively competitive interior. Far more than mere survival, one sees a concerted participative effort to outplay the very forces that condition their existence. To find room and manoeuvre in such a way that valued means of land, labour and identity are acquired and conserved.

In this chapter, the Mullukurumbas who represent the weak are seen, not as social dummies but as actors who are motivated exclusively by the shared norms, symbols and meanings of their own culture per se. It shows how, to varying degrees, in discernable social contexts, they use them to evaluate and reflect on their relative standing with others, sometimes questioning their cultural norms and at other times finding within it adaptive methods to manoeuvre through change. As actors, they are seen here as capable of reflective evaluation but in doing so, they do not simply consult some obscure calculus of desire, but refer to the sense of self and their relationship to others around them.

This chapter shows that the politics of the weak is institutionalised, meaning by that, not spontaneous, lacking planning and orientation, as seen by Scott. It also shows that the politics of the weak is sustained in the terrain of low politics, meaning by that, that it does not necessarily have to manifest as Movements in the terrain of high politics. It becomes imperative to conclude this study by having to raise two questions. They are (1) specifically, where do the Mullukurumbas and generally, the larger category of the 'weak' stand in Indian

politics? (2) what are the consequences of state formation in the Indian context,  
as a result of the politics of the weak ?

End-notes.

1. Cf. Suresh Sharma. Cultural Survival in the Age of Progress. Alternatives. Vol.13, No. 4, (October 1988), p. 509.
2. James C. Scott. Domination and the Arts of Resistance (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1990), p. 188.
3. Ranajit Guha., ed. Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society. Vol. 1, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 19.
4. Ramachandra Guha, 'Forestry and Social Protest in Kumaon', in Subaltern Studies, Vol.IV, ed. Ranajit Guha (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 99.
5. Op.cit., p. 21.
6. Passim., James C. Scott. Weapons of the Weak (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1985).
7. ibid., p. 2.
8. Passim., Ranajit Guha., ed. Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society. Vol. I, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982).
9. Op. cit., p. 9.
10. J.A. Barnes, 'Networks and Political Process' in Local Level Politics: Social and Cultural Perspectives, Marc Swartz, ed. (London: University of London Press, 1968), p. 54.
11. F.G. Bailey. Stratagems and Spoils: A Social Anthropology of Politics (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1969), p.1.
12. Passim., Kirk Mann. The Making of an English 'Underclass'? The Social Division of Welfare and Labour, (Buckingham:



- Open University Press, 1992).
13. Mullukurumba X1 works as a clerk in the Tamilnadu Electricity Department in Gudalur.
  14. Cf. E.M. Rogers. Diffusion of Innovations, 3rd ed. (New York: Free Press, 1983), p. 5.
  15. Passim., E.C. Banfield and L.F. Banfield. The Moral Basis of a Backward Society, (New York: Free Press, 1958).
  16. N. Ramkumar, Forest Officer in Mudumali Wild life Sanctuary in an interview given on the 21st October 1992.
  17. Mullukurumba X3 was an elder in the village of Cherumulli. This incident took place on the 22nd of October 1992.
  18. James C. Scott. Domination and the Arts of Resistance (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1990), p. 144.
  19. This conversation took place during a bus journey between Moonanad and Gudalur on the 5th of October 1992. All the participants in the discussion were residents in the village of Moonanad.
  20. Dr. R. Gunachander, RMO at the Ootacamund General Hospital in an interview on the 27th of september, 1992.
  21. J.C. Scott. Domination and the Arts of Resistance, (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1990), p. 145.
  22. Henry Volken, Ajoy Kumar and Sara Kaithathara (eds) Learning from the Rural Poor: Shared Experiences of the Mobile Orientation and Training Teams, (New Delhi: Indian Social Institute, 1982), p. 2.

23. Cf., Denis Goulet and Marco Walshok, 'Values among Underdeveloped Marginals: Illustrative Notes on Spanish Gypsies. Unpublished Monograph (Indiana: University of Indiana, June 1968)
24. E.C. Banfield and L.F. Banfield. The Moral Basis of Backward Society, (New York: Free Press, 1958), p. 35.
25. All three viewpoints mentioned above are not confined to individuals but well entrenched in the social vocabulary of the Mullukurumbas.
26. John Iliffe. A Modern History of Tanganyika (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 324.
27. Vandana Shiva, Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India (London: Zed Books, 1989), p. 145.
28. J.C. Scott. Domination and the Arts of Resistance, (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1990), p. 141.
29. Passim., Claude Levi Strauss. The Savage Mind (London: Weidenfield and Nicolson, 1972).
30. Alfonso Ortiz. The Tewa World: Space, Time, Being and Becoming in a Pueblo Society, (Chicago, Illinois: Chicago University Press, 1983), p. ix.
31. Mark Jurgensmeyer. Religion as Social Vision: The Movement Against Untouchability in 20th Century Punjab (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. 92.
32. Nirad C. Chauduri. The Continent of Circe: Being an Essay on the Peoples of India (London: Chatto and Windus, 1979), p. 187.

## CONCLUSION

The objective of this thesis was to describe the Mullukurumbas, a tribal group in Nilgiris who number around 1300, as actors whose political behaviour as well as stratagems arise from a sense of identity of the weak. While change has been the dominating reality and experience of the Mullukurumbas, more so since independence, it is seen as taking place both ways. This study shows how the Mullukurumbas rather than merely surviving, effectively determine their place in the social transformation under way in Nilgiris. As actors representing the weak, they reveal, vividly by their activities, how weak groups within the Indian polity can and do transact values with other groups and power holders in society, as well as with the state. The identity of weakness is seen as concealing a far more shrewd, sustained and reflexive reaction that questions rigorously change and how they can and cannot manoeuvre through it.

In conclusion to this study, along with summarising the thesis, it becomes imperative to raise two questions: (1) specifically, where do the Mullukurumbas and generally, the larger category of the weak stand in Indian politics ? (2) What are the consequences of state formation in the Indian context, as a result of the politics of the weak ?

Politics in this study was seen as power sharing between the strong and the weak within a canvas that was held taut by an underlying conflict between the state and society. This canvas was viewed from a 'middle-range' perspective. Aided by methodological individualism, this framework helped in portraying the interaction among the four protagonists: the state, society, strong and the weak.. The state - society conflict was seen as leading to constant redrawing of

boundaries which provides opportunities for the strong to settle in those niches created.

The strong were seen to ensconce themselves in the appropriating niches between the state and society from which they derive their personal power. They with their vested interests, sail smooth on the pathological phenomena of commercial and constituency politics in the Nilgiris. The strong derive their strength with the sanction of the state which depends on them to articulate and aggregate interests. The strong go further by deliberately excluding the weak from the legitimately recognised channels of power sharing, while performing the function that the state requires of them.

The terrain of high politics is therefore seen as being controlled by the strong who are able to span across regions, rooting their supports with the help of structures of the state and conscripted sub-elites from local regions. The weak are found to be pushed out of this terrain of high politics. The rules of high politics impose an asymmetry between the strong and the weak. Group size plus rules, tools and resources determine the conditions of this terrain.

Sangamam provided an opportunity to analyze the rules of high politics. It became visible in the failure of the counter-elites to carve out a constituency for the tribal people of Nilgiris. Nevertheless, it became obvious that the weak in spite of the denial of their right to address their interests and needs in the terrain of high politics refuse to tow the line of the counter-elites.

In the terrain of low politics, however a different picture emerges. The adversarial posture assumed by the state, society and the strong is effectively defused by the weak in this terrain. The role of actor and political activity, it

became obvious, was not confined to the strong alone. The weak play a part, even though external conditions pressurise them. Instead of exploitation being the final word in this study, analyses of the terrain of low politics revealed that the weak are more than desperadoes, they are actors who sustain reaction in those spaces that allow them to reap advantageous returns.

The Mullukurumbas by their active role in this terrain show that they do not aim to overthrow the state but stake their claim for room to manoeuvre whereby they can acquire and conserve valued means of power sharing in Nilgiris - land, money and identity. Land, money and identity are used to help the Mullukurumbas to renegotiate the weak - strong bonds as well as creating conditions for manoeuvre. This low politics of the Mullukurumbas takes place not through passionate protest Movements nor by spontaneous forms of resistance, lacking planning and organisation but by a repertoire. It is based on selective use of traditional and modern tools of bargaining and manoeuvre used within an institutionalised framework. More importantly, low politics is a sustained reaction which is based on the reorganisation of social institutions. It is centred around holding on to and increasing valued means of land, money and identity.

Land and money are economic assets in Nilgiris and valued as such. In the social sense, the process of hinduisation and westernisation that is taking place in Nilgiris is evidently valued for the identity of the group that it is supposed to enhance. These valued means were seen as the most significant factors with which definition of self and other takes place in Nilgiris. While some tribal groups in other places in India, for example, as in Jharkhand or the North-east, break through to the terrain of high politics the Mullukurumbas focusing on these

valued means use the terrain of low politics instead. The Mullukurumbas by focusing on these valued means reflect not only on their non-neutral perception of change but also express their wilful ignorance of transcendental politics vital for state formation.

The institutions of family and religion was seen in this study as bases for transactional politics as well as serving as sources that provide justification for such self-definition. Far more than merely stating that the Mullukurumbas are actors, this study provides evidence that their motivation is drawn exclusively from their shared norms or symbols and meanings. Family and religion provides Mullukurumbas a base to evaluate and reflect on their relative standing as individuals and as a group with others. These institutions provide a framework for the Mullukurumbas to question the norms of the political culture and at other times finding adaptive methods to manoeuvre social change.

Using the institutions of family and religion, the sense of being undermined and a sense of injustice become shared. The consciousness of group and the identity of weakness coalesce with this shared conceptualisation of being betrayed, undermined and persecuted among others. It is this substance that is constructed and rationalised within the notion of existence rationality. It helps to acquire, conserve and increase valued means, while the source of sustenance and energy fuelling this substance springs from the institutions of family and religion.

The weak, it therefore appears, use a facade of a progressive front behind which they have a reactionary interior. Adjustment to social change is thus based on realism. Evidence for this is shown in the examples relating the actions of the

Mullukurumbas in, milking the state, (as it is referred to locally), refusing to see development inputs as such, setting fire to forests, their peculiar relationship with forest officials or in their use of witchcraft, among others. Not only do they reveal how Mullukurumbas by their perceptiveness have come to a conclusion on what is happening to them and what reaction is legitimate fit under the circumstances. But they also reveal the institutional bases of their actions.

Politics is therefore being stretched in India, not merely in terms of the boundaries of competitive politics but also in terms of the focus of politics itself. The weak pushed out of the terrain of high politics are focusing their attention solely on the terrain of low politics. By doing so, they are stretching the boundaries of normally recognised politics, where interests are articulated and aggregated.

The squalid end of the tribal people anticipated by Nirad Chaudri seem simplistic in comparison. In the active role of the weak lies a far greater danger to the Indian polity. The perception and participation by the weak in the terrain of high politics is increasingly becoming farcical and more seriously becoming cynical. The expectations of the Mullukurumbas no longer rest on the democratic and representative structures of high politics, to provide returns with regards to their interests. In their acquisition and conserving of valued means through low politics, the weak are expressing more than ingenuity and a political industriousness that draws sustenance from a cottage base. It reflects a vigilanteist component that ignores the capacity as well as the legitimacy of authority structures of the state to determine the means and ends of power sharing. Instead of a direct rebellion against the state what we see in the politics

of the weak is a subtle, discreet attack against a far wider entity, the 'other'.

As mentioned earlier, the incongruity and incompatibility of the state and society has led to a fracture in consensus formation on what the ends of politics ought to be. As a result, in the peripheral regions of the polity, even as the state aims to integrate them in the process of creating a nation, for the Mullukurumbas, land, labour and identity come to appear as valued ends in itself. Acquiring them becomes far more crucial. It is in that context that state formation in India and its ends need to be questioned.

While revealing a far more active and effective role in the political arena when compared with the peasants of Sedaka as described by Scott, it must be said that the politics of the weak does not go far in posing a realistic challenge to the power and existence of the state itself. In India as in Nilgiris, the challenges to the power and existence of the state is much more from the strong than the weak. But more importantly, for the weak, it is not the state which personifies their nemesis but a combination of visible persons and not so visible conditions of society. In that sense in Nilgiris, the weak are resisting the strong and the society no less than the state. It is within this context that the implications of the politics of the weak for the Indian polity should be analyzed. Politics of the weak results in an over riding of the transcendental issues and values considered important by the state. It stalls a dialogue between the weak and the state as a result of the wedged-in strong. This further redirects politics from its transcendental motives and purpose.

To what avail then are the actions of the weak ? Are they determinate ? The answer is, perhaps it may be apparently so. The weak in Indian politics may



seem to be at a dead end. But, since we are talking of a game which is not zero sum for the actors and where the down fall of the state is not directly related to the politics of the weak but of a much more complex summation, then the short term gains of the weak need to be accounted for. Further if we take the long term view that the goal of the state is what it is, as stated in the Indian Constitution, then, with every act of the weak, the goals of the state are that much farther away to being fulfilled. Therein lies the indeterminacy of the politics of the weak.

One question raised in the course of this research is, does the present form of democracy, as evident in India, help the weak, or rather allow them to act within the realm of high politics? The answer to this question is a definite 'no.' The weak while evolving forms of opposition and obstruction still loose in the long term. On the other hand, the very fact that a segment of Indian society - the weak - is consistently and increasingly being denied a legitimate right to derive their valued ends in the terrain of high politics suggests not only to the weak losing in the short term but to a simultaneous widening of their aspirations and the level of accessibility. It is this latter phenomenon that is crucial to the continued legitimacy of the democratic polity itself. The long term effects of this seemingly pessimistic form of conclusion should be seen within the framework of a stalemated state - society conflict. .

The answer to this puzzle eventually depends on how the weak fit in along side, a society that is built on status and hierarchy while it conceptualises politics as amoral, a state that pursues a neo-colonial philosophy directed against the society and a strong who are wedged in between. In other words, this four-

cornered politics creates its own dynamics. Intriguingly this four pronged interaction affects state formation making its expansion dependent on the strong who far from being conveyor belts serve as gatekeepers standing between the state and the weak.

Analysis of sangamam, the Movement for pan-tribal autonomy, reveals two alternatives: to restructure state, society and the wedged-in strong or autonomy for the weak. In other words, the choices are limited to a horizontal comradeship between the strong and the weak or an exclusivistic politics for the weak within an autonomous region. Without the above choices the political institutions available become irrelevant to the Mullukurumbas while institutions such as the family and religion become neo-political institutional categories. Therein lies the widening of the gap between the theoretical goals of the state and its outcome in practice and the on-going indeterminacy of the politics of the weak.

It is important that the state in India should shed its 'soft' image and make a more aggressive effort at social change. In the absence of such an effort the state would merely find itself encapsulated by the society around it and the strong wedged in at the border between the state and society. This in turn raises the much larger question of how the state is represented and by whom. Overall the trend evident in the process of social change in India is of a soft state increasingly becoming softer. This would mean a gradual denial of accessibility to the weak in the terrain of high politics. It is in this respect that one needs to reiterate that the politics of the weak is closely aligned to the effectiveness of the state to define and widen the arena of high politics.

## GLOSSARY

**AIADMK** All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam. The Ruling Party in the state legislature, Tamilnadu. A Political Party that broke away from the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam. AIADMK has dominated state politics for most of the last two decades. It is known more for it's charismatic 'film star' leaders than for it's policies.

**AIDS** Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. Without systematic medical checks, is allegedly assuming epidemic proportions among tribal people in Nilgiris.

**Adidravida** 'Original Dravidans', used for certain groups to signify among other features, the purity of race, and more importantly, justify and draw political mileage from the primacy of a pre-Aryan presence in India.

**Adijyothi** 'Original flame', used to signify symbolically the uniting of a vital as well as primal energy source, thereby suggesting the unity of interests and needs of the tribal people of the region.

**Adivasi** Aboriginal or 'Original inhabitant,'it is used for tribal people inhabiting the hillier and more forested areas who were traditionally shifting cultivators and hunter-gatherers and sometimes settled peasants.

**Alukurumba** One of the now commonly considered subgroups within the Kurumba tribe who are now predominantly found in southern Nilgiris. The prefix 'Alu' could suggest a royal lineage for the Kurumbas as a whole. It is also interpreted as reflecting a one time dominance of this subgroup over the rest of the Kurumba tribe and thereby the prefix, which means 'ruling' or 'to rule'..

**Arjuna** The mythical character in the hindu epic Mahabharata, known for his sterling qualities including valour and his determination to stand for the right, and the good against the forces of evil.

**Ashta Lakshmi** The goddess most commonly worshipped by the Mullukurumbas. Also referred to as 'Athirshta Lakshmi' or 'Ishta Lakshmi,' the terms mean either, 'goddess who brings luck' or 'our favourite goddess'. Goddess Lakshmi in Hindu mythology/scriptures refers to the one who is the guardian and giver of wealth to the household.

**Badaga** The largest single group in Nilgiris as well as the dominant among the 'indigenous', pre-British groups to settle in Nilgiris. They are considered to be erstwhile refugees affected by the wars in the deccan plateau during the 16th and 17th centuries.

**Bettakurumba** Another, now commonly considered, 'subgroup' of Kurumba who are now predominately found in the North-west of Nilgiris. Less than 2000 in number, the prefix 'Betta' suggests 'the largest', 'the biggest' or 'the eldest'.

**Bhavani** A minor river with a small and limited catchment area and minor basin flowing north of the Nilgiris, through the Western ghats, towards the Arabian Sea. Entirely rainfed, it results in flooding during monsoon while shrinking into a rivulet during summer.

**Bihar** A land locked state in North India. While North Bihar is an extremely fertile level tract, the south is wooded and hilly. Being the richest state in India, in terms of mineral wealth, its use has been a major cause for conflict between the state and the larger preponderance of tribal people in the south, leading to the Jharkhand Movement.

**Bonded Labour** An exploitative form of labour that derives its name from the 'buying' of the debtor and quite often the debtor's family, supposedly in 'exchange' for wiping out a debt that gradually assumes overwhelming proportions.

**Brahmin** Member of the highest of the four traditional varnas. The 'twice born' Brahmin exercised control over the rituals and rites regarding worship and performing intellectual work. From earliest times they were also administrators and landholders.

**Caste** In Portuguese 'casta' means race, lineage/ancestry. Caste has been usefully defined as 'ritual-economic relationships of interdependence within a hierarchical structure.' It also has a religious connotation to it within the framework

of Hinduism.

**Chalukyas** The name given to two dynasties; The Western Chalukyas ruled Deccan from A.D. 543 to 757 and again from A.D. 975 to 1189. The Eastern Chalukyas ruled from A.D. 624 to 1070. Their main rivals in the region were the Mauryas to the north and the Pallavas, Cholas, Yadavas, Hoysalas and the Kakatiyas in the south.

**Chola** A powerful dynasty prominent during two periods: around 2nd century B.C. and during the 9th and 10th century A.D. It was primarily a South Indian Kingdom with its capital city in the heart of present day Tamilnadu - Thanjavur.

**Collector** Officer of the state government in charge of a district.

**Coonoor** The second largest town in Nilgiris about miles of Ooty, situated at an altitude of feet above sea level. During the British era, it was a military garrison town.

**Dalit** The name used alternatively to describe those who are otherwise called as the Scheduled castes, Untouchables or Harijans.

**Deccan** A peninsular plateau with extensive plains, flat or rolling, at levels ranging from 300 to 900 metres, dotted with conical or rounded hills or traversed by flat topped ridges. It is enclosed by the Vindhya mountain range to the north,

the western ghats to the east and the Arabian sea to its west.

**Deepavali** 'Festival of fire-works', one of the most popular of modern day Hindu festivals, signifies the triumph of good over evil as personified by the victory of over.

**Dodabetta** The highest peak in south India, 8652 feet above mean sea level.

**Dravidian** Refers to a sub-group considered as a breeding isolate in genetics of the Indic race. It comprises primarily those who speak the Dravidian languages of which tamil, Telugu, Malayalam and Kannada are the major ones. tamil corresponds in many points to an ancestral proto-dravidian parent language. In its political connotation, it refers to the so called original inhabitants of the sub-continent who moved southwards as a result of the invading Aryans.

**Dussehra** Annual hindu festival, lasting nine nights or ten days, in October: also known as Nava-Rathiri in Tamil. (The Nine Nights). It is a festival of lights.

**Ghat** Refers to the mountain ranges forming the eastern and western edges of the Deccan plateau of peninsular India. In hindi, it means 'river landing stairs' or mountain pass. It is south India's principal water shed and also produces dense forests. Extensively dammed to produce electricity. It has a number of hill resorts located in the mountains.

**Gram panchayat** Statutory Council of elected members representing one or more villages.

**Gudalur** The fourth largest town in Nilgiris, also the taluk headquarters of the same name. It is the gateway to the neighbouring states of Kerala and Karnataka. It is significant in this study on two counts; majority of its population is tribal and also its 'peripheral' position makes its population multilingual.

**High Yielding Varieties** In agricultural parlance, this refers to the new strains of seeds and seedlings introduced as part of the 'green revolution' to improve the yield in fields. The use of high yielding varieties begun in the 1960s has led to, according to Government sources, a 'spectacular' increase in production, pushing up wheat production seven times and rice production three fold since Independence.

**Irula** 'As dark as night', the name is given to a tribal community in Nilgiris. Some of them continue to be hunter-gatherers while most of them have taken up varied occupations. They are found mostly in the northern part of the region.

**Jajman** A feudal title attributed to ones patron, this usually signified a socio-economic as well as a political relationship to the client.

**Jat** Caste of cultivators especially found in Punjab, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh.



**Jati** Derived from an Indo-European verbal root meaning 'genesis,' 'origin,' 'birth', applied in most Indian languages to any living species; especially used by anthropologists to denote localised/provincial caste groups or lineages.

**Jennukurumba** Also known as 'Kattu Naickens' meaning 'Lord of the forests'. Numbering around 1000, they reside mostly north of Nilgiris.

**Jharkhand Movement.** The Movement for a separate state within the Indian Federation. It draws support from the tribal people of south Bihar. Its ideology is based on the argument that this region which the richest source of minerals in India is also the poorest.

**Kali** Mother goddess. Considered in south Indian mythology as one of the chief deities. Literally means 'the black one'. The goddess represents shakti or divine power as a female principle.

**Kannada** The language spoken by a majority of people in the state of Karnataka. Along with Tamil, Malayalam and Telugu, the three major languages of South India, it is considered to have evolved from a single source.

**Karma** Though it refers to the hindu concept of fate, but in real terms it most often is referred to a sense of apathy bordering on a feeling of resignation based on hopelessness.

**Karnataka** A south Indian state that borders Tamilnadu and more specifically Nilgiris to the north.

**Kerala** Another south Indian state that borders Tamilnadu and more specifically Nilgiris to the west.

**Kota** One of the indigenous Dravidian speaking peoples of Nilgiris. They now live in and around seven villages and number around 4000. their religion entails a family trinity of two brother deities and the goddess wife of the elder.

**Kotagiri** An important town in Nilgiris. It literally means 'the holy hill of the Kotas.' In contemporary India this town is known most often for its elitist international Public schools.

**Kuruchiya** A less well known tribal group in Nilgiris numbering less than 2000. Due to their displacement in the social transformation taking place in nilgiris, they now live in mixed-group villages.

**Kurumba** The name literally means 'mischief maker.'

**Malabar** Name given to the region south of Goa enclosed between India's western coast and the western ghats.

**Malayalam** Official language of the state of kerala. It has a written tradition

dating from the 9th century. It uses a script derived from the tamil writing system.

**Mizo** Also called as Lushai, they are Tibetan-Burman speaking people numbering around 400,000. Known for their head-hunting as well as slash and burn cultivation methods during the last century they came into the political domain as one of the first tribal groups to form a state within the Indian federation - Mizoram.

**Moyar** A minor river flowing through Nilgiris. Moyar dam built across the river is a major source of electric power.

**Mudumalai** Literally meaning 'ancient hill.' It is a wild life Reserve with an area of 124 square miles and is located about 35 miles north of Ootacamund.

**Mullukurumba** The prefix 'Mullu' could either mean 'thorny' or the 'source' or 'beginning.'

**Murugan** Chief deity of the tamil people. Considered as the second son of Shiva and parvati and the younger brother of Ganesha. There are chief shrines in south India which all devotees of Murugan are encouraged to visit in their pilgrimage.

**Naxalite Movement** It refers to the Movement which originated from the village Naxalbari in west Bengal. During the 1960s and 1970s this communist based

**Movement** struck terror through the countryside as it unleashed its assault on the state.

**Nilgiri** Literally 'blue mountain'; name given to the district for its misty blue mountains that sets it apart from the rest, within the state of Tamilnadu.

**Oliyum Oliyum** Meaning sound and light in tamil, it refers to an hour long weekly television programme. The programme is composed of song sequences from tamil films, both old and new.

**Onam** Chief festival of the Keralites. It is a harvest festival which occurs during September - October.

**Ootacamund** The principal town in Nilgiris. The suffix 'mund' refers to a Toda settlement. Now known as Ooty in short, in tamil it is called Udhagaimandalam which means 'residence in the peaks'.

**Pallava** A dynasty which ruled a major part of south India between the 4th and 9th century A.D. The Pallavas were known for their overseas exploits in south-east Asia and Ceylon. They supported Buddhism, Jainism as well as Brahmanism. They are well known for their architecture as seen in their shore temples in Mahabalipuram.

**Palukurumba** The prefix palu could either mean 'milk' or 'ancient'. Numbering

less than 1000 they reside mostly in south-west Nilgiris in the present day.

**Panchayat** Literally 'the five'; traditionally a political and judicial gathering of caste/tribe/clan elders, now also used also for popular mass meetings at which collective decisions are taken.

**Panchayati Raj** Modern System of grass-roots democracy based on elected local councils.

**Paniya** Another less well known tribal group in Nilgiris. They live in mixed villages. They recently came into the limelight for the large scale 'bonded labour' the group was subjected to.

**Parvati** The name literally means 'daughter of the mountains' in sanskrit. The wife of Shiva, she is seen as the benevolent aspect of the goddess Shakti.

**Patta** Title deed to land. It usually states rent payable and tenorial customs and customs.

**Porampoke** Type of temporary tenure of government land. In common parlance it also refers to 'wastelands' unfit for cultivation that is distributed to the under-privileged.

**Prasadam** food offered to the gods which are blessed by the priests and

distributed to the people after prayers. Considered holy by Hindus.

**Protective Discrimination** Also known as 'positive discrimination', it refers to reservation and privileges accorded to the 'under-privileged' in Indian society. Though percentages vary from state to state, the category of groups who are scheduled castes or scheduled tribes are provided access to education and jobs in Government institutions.

**Puja** Literally meaning 'worship', it is an act of homage involving offerings to the icon or deity using fruits and flowers.

**Rama** The central figure in the epic Ramayana. He is considered as an incarnation of Vishnu. Vishnu is considered as 'the one who works everywhere', 'the preserver' and 'the god of beneficence and protection'.

**Ravana** Considered as the villain in Ramayana and embodying in himself an evil character who stands in juxtaposition to the goodness and majesty of lord Rama in the the epic Ramayana.

**Reserve Forests** These are forests taken over and maintained by the state. The intention is to safeguard them from destruction from any source.

**Sangamam** Literally 'a point of convergence of many rivers'; here the name given by the Counter-elites for the 'movement towards a pan-tribal unity in Nilgiris.'

**Santhal** A large tribal group numbering well over 5,000,000. They are concentrated in the states of Bihar, west Bengal and Orissa. The Jharkhand Movement derives its largest support base from this group.

**Shiva** 'The destroyer'; the God presiding over personal destinies including procreation, literally means 'the auspicious one'.

**Soliga** Another less well known tribal group in Nilgiris less than 5000 in number. They too now live predominantly in mixed-group villages in south-east Nilgiris.

**Tahsildar** Officer in charge of the revenue administration of a taluk; also known as 'tahsil'.

**Taluk** Administrative unit forming part of a district.

**Tamilnadu** Literally 'country of the Tamil people'; The new name given to the erstwhile state of Madras.

**Thenkurumba** The prefix 'then' suggests their southern origin. The size of this group is not known.

**Toda** The most prominent tribe in Nilgiris. They are well known for their pastoral lifestyle as well as their polyandrous practices. They live in peculiar shaped houses that resemble half shaped barrels.

**Uralikurumba** The prefix 'urali' means 'the one who rules the region.' They are found mostly in the north-west of Nilgiris in the present day.

**Veda** Knowledge, literally means 'I know'. It refers to the sacred writings of Hinduism from C. 1500-500 B.C.

**Vinayagar** The tamil name given to Lord Ganesh, eldest son of Shiva and Parvati.

**Wyanaad** Refers to the plains on the slopes of the western ghats. It is a part of kerala state. It literally means 'land of fields.' Among the districts in Kerala, Wyanaad has the largest concentration of tribal people.

**Zilla Parishad** District Council, forming the highest tier in the Panchayati Raj otherwise known as the institutions created for bringing about 'democratic decentralisation'. It is composed mainly of elected and co-opted members of the other two levels below; villages and taluks.



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## APPENDIX

### MULLUKURUMBA VILLAGES AND HAMLETS VISITED DURING THE FIELD TRIP. (SEPTEMBER - DECEMBER 1992)

VILLAGE	HAMLETS
Cherumulli	Perkal.
Mudumalai	Theppakadu, Karkudi.
Nelliyalam	Pakkana, Vilangoor, Perumballi, Ellamana, Kottati.
Monnanad	Mudaranthal, Kanyamyayal.
Erumad	Cherchad, Nedungode, Oorimala, Kappala, Narivalappu, Kappakandru.
Charangode	Kallichal, Kennatu, Pedacheri, Yellamali, Arattuparai.

## **CORE INTERVIEWEES**

**(Interviewed between September and December 1992)**

1. Mr. N. Subramaniam, Lecturer, Madras Christian College. Madras.
2. Dr. P. Gunachander, Doctor, Ootacamund Government Hospital, Ootacamund.
3. Mr. S. Ramkumar, Forest Officer, Mudumalai Wild life Sanctuary, Mudumalai.
4. Mr. G. Jesudoss, Social Worker, ACORD Development Project,  
Nilgiris.
5. Mr. N. Mahendran. Lecturer, Tribal Research Institute, Ootacamund.
6. Mr. Palaniappan, Trader on Forest Products, Ootacamund.
7. Mr. S. Swaminathan. Head Teacher, Government Primary School, Kallichal.
8. Mr. Murugan. Research Assiatant, Tribal Research Institute, Ootacamund.
9. Mr. Pandurangan. Community Welfare Officer, Secretariat,Ootacamund.
10. Mr. Theyan. Assistant Commisioner, Police Department, Ootacamund.
11. Mr. M. Chacko. Party Worker, Communist Party (Marxist), Gudalur.
12. Mr. Thayumanavan. Party Worker and former Council member, All India Anna  
Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, Gudalur.
13. Mr. M. Maran. Former Member of the Nilgiri Tea Growers Association and  
member of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam.
14. Mrs. Roopa Raghavan, Officer for Tribal Welfare and Development, Secretariat,  
Madras.
15. Mrs. Laksmi Sivagnanam, Loan Disbursement Officer, State Bank of India,  
Ootacamund.
16. Mr. Sridharan, Sub-editor, Tamil political Weekly Magazine, Poomalai.  
Coimbatore.

17. Mr. M. Ismail, Committee Member, Nilgiri Tea Plantation labourers Association, Ootacamund.
18. Mr. Nedunchezian, Manager, Vijayan Tea Plantations, Coonoor.
19. Mrs. Mary Thappan, Social Worker, Evangelical Missionary Society, Coimbatore.
20. Mr. Kolaindaivelu, Business man and owner of a transport fleet; Blue Mountain Travels, Ootacamund.
21. Mr. Anand Srivastava, Director, Nilgiri Tea Factory, Coonoor.
22. Mr. L. Ganesan, Former Secretary, Tribal Welfare Board, Government of Tamilnadu.
23. Mrs Gomathi Seshadri, Assistant Director, Social Welfare Board, Nilgiris.
24. Mr. Samuel Richard, Social worker, Bethel Agricultural Fellowship, Salem.
25. Rev. Deenadayalan, Pastor, St. Matthew's Church, Kotagiri.
26. Mr. M. Munda, Tribal Leader and speaker at the Tribal Conference, Wyanaad.
27. Mrs. Leela Madhavan, Social Activist, Women Against Alcohol, Kerala.
28. Mr. Kota Kailasam, Member, Tribal Co-operative Society, Nilgiris.
29. Mr. S.V. Giridharan, Member, Block Level Panchayat, Gudalur Taluk.
30. Shri. Velu Swami, Priest, Perumal Koil, Car Street, Gudalur.
31. Mr. K.V. Parthasarathi, Village level Worker, Department of Agriculture, Gudalur.
32. Mr. R. Paramban, Contractor, Ratnagiri Tea Estate, Gudalur.
33. Mr. Kodyappa, Tribal Elder, Karkudi hamlet, Mudumalai.
34. Mr. Sakthivel, Employee, State Bank of India, Ootacamund.
35. Mr. Balagopal, Constable, Mudumalai Police Station.
36. Mr. Lijjan, Panchayat Member, Moonanad.
37. Mr. Baskar, Assistant Block Development Officer, Gudalur.

38. Mr. Achutha Narayanan, Money Lender and Shopkeeper, Nelliyalam.
39. Mr. Lakshmikanthan, Liquor shop owner, Nelliyalam.
40. Mr. Venugopal, Planter and Landlord, Malar Gardens, Ootacamund.
41. Mr. Krishnan, Shopkeeper and trader in forest produce, Nelliyalam.
42. Mr. K.P. Varadhan, Taluk Revenue Officer, Gudalur.
43. Mr. Kulandainayakan, Inspector of Vaccinations, Gudalur.
44. Mr. Palaniandavar, Officer, Tribal Development Agency, Madras.
45. Mr. Sokkanathan, Member, Tribal Co-operative Corporation, Ootacamund.
46. Mr. Manmathan, Warden, Cherangode Government School, Cherangode.
47. Mrs. Kamala Raman, Officer, Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas, Social Welfare Department, Madras.
48. Mr. Ravichandran, Officer, Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Programme, Madras.
49. Mr. Kumaragurubaran, Loan Disbursement Officer, State Bank of India, Ootacamund.
50. Mr. Karthik, Trader in Tribal Handicrafts, Nilgiri Handicraft Emporium, Coonoor.
51. Mr. Prabhakaradoss, Manager, Government Timber Depot, Mudumalai.
52. Mr. Chakravarthi, Member, Nilgiri Environment Protection Agency, Ootacamund.
53. Mr. Sundaralingam, Officer, Government Ration Shop, Erumad.
54. Mr. Mathur Gopinathan, Member, Malayalee Welfare Association, Gudalur.
55. Mr. Prakash Nair, Estate Agent, Gudalur.
56. Mr. Hariharan, Student - Ootacamund Government College, Erumad.
57. Mr. Arumugam, Ayurvedic Medicant, Mudaranthal Hamlet, Moonanad.
58. Mr. Madhusudhanan, Teacher, Government School, Cherumulli.
59. Mr. Kunjiraman, Retired Engineer - Bhavani Dam Project, Anna Nagar, Madras.

60. Mr. Kalanidhi, Member, Tribal Housing and Land Development Commission,  
Madras.

**EXTENDED INTERVIEWS WITH MULLUKURUMBAS.**

(Cherchad hamlet in Erumad village, between September 27th and 29th, 1992)

Mr. Kumarappa, Mr. Sevvai, Mr. Soolan.

(Nedungode hamlet in Erumad village, between September 30th and October 1st, 1992)

Mr. Kaladi. Mr. Thandu.

(Oorimala hamlet in Erumad village, between October 1st and 2nd, 1992)

Mr. Vinayam.

(Kappala hamlet in Erumad village, October 3rd, 1992)

Mr. Barathan, Mr. Hanuranga.

(Narivalappu hamlet in Erumad village, October 4th, 1992)

Mr. Karuppan.

(Kappakandru hamlet in Erumad village, October 5th, 1992)

Mr. Kodinayagan.

(Kallichal hamlet in Cherangode village, October 6th, 1992)

Mr. Baskaran, Mr. Kabali.

(Kennatu hamlet in Cherangode village, October 7th, 1992)

Mr. Vigneswaran, Mr. Neghizhandan.

(Pedacheri hamlet in Cherangode village, October 8th, 1992)

Mr. Navamalar, Mr. Kuilragam.

(Yellamai hamlet in Cherangode village, October 9th, 1992)

Mr. Achuthan, Mr. Sampath.

(Arattuparai hamlet in Cherangode village, October 10th, 1992)

Mr. Pillai, Mr. Siganallan.

(Perkal hamlet in Cherumulli Village, between October 11th and 15th, 1992)

Mr. Salappan, Mr. Pichamutthu, Mr. Ottapan, Mr. Irudhayaraj, Mr. Iyyapan, Mr. Dorai, Mr. Baskaran, Mr. Navamani, Mr. Chellapan, Mr. Pugazhendhi.

(Mudaranthal hamlet in Moonanad village, between October 16th and 18th, 1992)

Mr. Thazhappan, Mr. Raghaveera, Mr. Sivaraman, Mr. Komandalan, Mr. Thandava.

(Kanyamyayal hamlet in Moonanad village, between October 19th and 20th, 1992)

Mrs. Sellamma, Mr. Poonaravu, Mr. Lomanappa, Mr. Velupillai, Mr. Hundinatan.

(Theppakadu hamlet in Mudumalai village between October 21st and 24th, 1992)

Mr. Sevalkodion, Mr. Mullai, Mr. Nagaiandan, Mr. Thayumanavan, Mr. Choolam.

(Karkudi hamlet in Mudumalai village between October 24th and 26th, 1992)

Mr. Viyalan, Mr. Eriyappa, Mr. Puthandi, Mr. Lokanathan, Mr. Kusandi.

Pakkana hamlet in Nellyalam village between October 27th and 28th, 1992)

Mr. Nambiandavan, Mr. Kuttichelvan.

Vilangoor hamlet in Nellyalam village between October 29th and November 1st, 1992)

Mrs. Arasinal, Mr. Gundanna.

Perumballi hamlet in Nellyalam village between November 2nd and 3rd, 1992)

Mr. Kootiyandi, Mr. Mullairasan.

Ellamana hamlet in Nellyalam village between November 4th and 5th, 1992)

Mrs. Thayammal, Mr. Vilangovelan.

Kottati hamlet in Neliyallam village between November 6th and 8th, 1992)

Mr. Vasudevan, Mr. Ellamana.



# THE NILGIRIS DISTRICT

