

JOHNS HOPKINS
UNIVERSITY

Department of Anthropology

404 Macaulay Hall / 3400 N. Charles Street
Baltimore MD 21218-2684
410-516-7272 / FAX 410-516-6080

March 25, 2010

Greetings all,

I'm quite looking forward to sharing in the conversation at Agrarian Studies in just a few short weeks. Here are a few comments on the paper that I am contributing, "Ripening with the Earth: On Maturity and Modernity in South India." I had originally hoped to contribute some of my more recent ethnographic work on film production practices in south India, but I am rather embarrassed by the current state of the paper I was planning to share. The paper here instead draws upon many years of work on questions of agrarian and moral tradition in rural Tamil Nadu in south India, work that had culminated in the book I published late last year – *Crooked Stalks: Cultivating Virtue in South India* (Durham: Duke University Press).

That book has sought to address the simple question of how people come to live as they ought to live, and has taken this question as a matter of "cultivation," in several senses: concerning the moral horizons of modern development; the personal life of desires, deeds, and habits; and the making of living environments for both moral and natural growth. The book argues that the work of cultivation in all these senses has been essential to the modern fate of the Piramalai Kallars in rural south India, a caste condemned and policed for decades as a "criminal tribe." Focusing on both their colonial subjection and contemporary condition, and triangulating between ethnographic, archival, and vernacular literary material, the book seeks to show that agricultural strategies of colonial Kallar reform built upon longstanding imaginations of the agrarian cultivator as a morally cultivated being in Tamil literary, moral, and religious tradition. For those of you who have seen the book, I would be delighted to discuss it in relation to the present paper.

The paper presented here grows out of that project, and begins by observing that an organic language of growth and maturation suffuses the discourse of modern development in India and elsewhere. The paper seeks to invest such a language of natural transformation with a critical edge, and an essential element of chance and contingency, by exploring maturity as the potential outcome of cultivating practice. How to think about the prospect of maturity under modern conditions of life without referring this prospect back solely to the inevitability of nature or the necessity of a deliberate guidance? Can we conceive postcolonial maturity in terms other than as the attainment of a form already perfected elsewhere, or as a failure of such realization? The paper explores such questions by drawing upon three complex and ambivalent instances of a cultivated maturity at work upon one particular rural south Indian terrain: the postcolonial legacies of colonial Kallar policing; the untimely fate of a corporate tree plantation investment scheme attempted in the 1990s; and the enduring traditions of organic transformation exercised by agrarian cultivators in the region. Through the intersecting trajectories of these three stories, the paper suggests, landscapes of both agrarian practice and rural selfhood alike emerge as palimpsests of moral and material possibility.

Thank you, and see you soon.

Yours,



Anand Pandian

Ripening with the Earth: On Maturity and Modernity in South India

A paper forthcoming from *Modern Makeovers: Oxford Handbook of Modernity in South Asia*, edited by Saurabh Dube and Ishita Banerjee-Dube, Oxford University Press

Anand Pandian / Anthropology / Johns Hopkins University / pandian@jhu.edu

In the wake of the European Enlightenment, modernity has been widely associated with the attainment of maturity. Kant famously described enlightenment in 1784, for example, as an emergence from the condition of a “self-imposed immaturity,” that is, from an “inability to use one’s understanding without guidance from another.”¹ It has been by now well established that this image of a possible maturity must be greatly revised to account for the specific conditions of colonial and postcolonial modernity. Colonial subjects in South Asia and elsewhere encountered the prospect of such freedom under the shadow of despotic authority. Widely engaged as childlike in their essential nature, colonial subjects grappled with insistent relations of guidance taken as essential to the very possibility of their development. Their capacity for such development under such conditions was judged explicitly and implicitly against the authority of universal standards of maturity, in relation to which the particular immaturity of their character and customs could be assessed and potentially overcome. The developmental imagination in which Western colonialism shared has therefore depended upon an understanding of history itself as a general course of progress toward perfection.² Wherever exercised, that is, the association of modernity with maturity has relied upon an image of history as a universal trajectory of gradual transcendence.

In a series of lectures delivered in 2000, Ranajit Guha explored the limits of this image of universal history as “World-history” in the sense elaborated by Hegel, that is, history as the actualization of a universal reason or “spirit.”³ Guha calls attention to the providential quality of this World-history: its freedom from arbitrariness, chance, or contingency. Therefore, while the actualization of spirit may appear analogous to the realization of the potential borne by a seed or germ, Guha emphasizes that history for Hegel represents a different order or principle of development than that of nature. In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, Hegel had distinguished the cyclical quality of natural change—“in nature there is nothing new under the sun,” he wrote—from the linear and progressive production of newer and higher forms in the world of the spirit, the properly historical development of these forms mediated by a struggle for self-consciousness. Hegel invests this structural distinction with a more concrete reality, Guha observes, through an elaboration of historical stages. Stages of “World-history” may be distinguished from “Prehistory” by their evident lack of “immersion in nature” and the degree to which they affirm freedom, conditions attested by the empirical emergence of states. From this vantage point, the Orient in particular appears trapped in a state of “spiritual infancy,” China and India excluded from World-history because “they have not matured fully into statehood.”⁴ An apparent absence of maturity in the form of self-conscious freedom, Guha argues, ultimately devolves into philosophical ground for “right of conquest.”⁵

Guha probes the limit of such history by seeking to approach it and to think it from both sides: both from within and beyond the contours of its universality. Calling upon historiography to rid itself of its “statist blinkers,” Guha draws attention to “the past as a story of man’s being in the everyday world.”⁶ Guha identifies this everyday life of the past in the present “historicality,” and he finds evidence of its presence in diverse vernacular traditions.

In particular, he suggests, we may find such a quality at work in the reflections of Tagore on the childhood history of his own poetic impulse, which dwell upon unanticipated incidents such as the glimpse of dew in a coconut grove at sunrise, the sight of a gathering mass of dark blue clouds, and the image of a cow licking the body of a donkey. Engaging such encounters with a world of inhabited nature, Guha implies, may lead us “to look afresh at life in order to recuperate the historicity of what is humble and habitual.”⁷ They do so by attesting to “the incipience of sheer possibility,” to “a tendency that does not know where it is going.”⁸

Guha is concerned here with the relation between such ordinary events in a world of experience and the historical maturation of Tagore’s being as a poet. I would argue, however, that we may take up this distinction between universal history and a more tangible and lived historicity as a way of posing broader questions concerning maturity and modernity as such. How to think about the prospect of maturity under modern conditions of life without referring this prospect back solely to either the inevitability of natural recurrence or to the necessity of a deliberate guidance? How may we restore to maturation the accident of encounter, while maintaining at the same time the commitment to process that maturation implies? Must we oppose the possibility of a mature autonomy to the determinations of natural character, or is there some way of finding ground for a different kind of freedom in the sheer incipience of natural life? How do we reconcile the collective horizons of deliberate intervention and intentional action at work in modern practices of development with the force and tendency of immanent processes of ongoing change? And through such developments, may we find a means of conceiving postcolonial maturity neither as the attainment of a form already perfected elsewhere, nor as a failure of such realization?⁹

An organic language of growth and maturation suffuses the discourse of development, David Ludden has observed: “The success of policies in promoting development can be gauged and steps prescribed to promote economic growth, as a biologist or doctor might prescribe a regimen to enhance the health and maturation of cells or people.”¹⁰ This essay seeks to invest such a language of natural and organic development—admittedly both pervasive and problematic—with a critical edge. I argue that the image of *ripening* in particular may lend us a way of conceiving effectively the alterity of maturation under postcolonial conditions, insofar as we interpret this image against the grain of a conventional naturalization.¹¹ “Ripening” brings the development both of subject and of nature—or, both of self and landscape—into a common frame. Ripening may be taken to invest both of these domains with an essential element of chance and contingency, inasmuch as this process may be understood as a consequence of cultivating endeavors of diverse kinds. This language also highlights the convergence of multiple histories and practices of maturity in the postcolonial present, and the singular forms of life that may be pursued at these interstices.

In what follows, I lend substance to these arguments by sketching three overlapping projects of maturation—their trajectories, limits, and displacements—in rural south India. Each of these finds expression on a single terrain of natural and cultural transformation: the agrarian environment of the Cumbum Valley in southern Tamil Nadu.¹² I found over the course of extensive fieldwork here that this was indeed a landscape of open incipience, one on which, as my interlocutors suggested, “even the temple towers turn to garbage heaps” through the sheer force of natural contingency. What kind of maturity could such an earth sustain?

* * *

A small building on the sprawling campus of the Madurai District Collectorate in southern Tamil Nadu hosts the office of the Special Deputy Collector (Kallar Reclamation): perhaps the only senior civil servant in independent India explicitly charged with the welfare and advancement of a single Hindu caste. The office is a legacy of the 1911 Criminal Tribes Act, and its enlistment in the colonial policing of Piramalai Kallar castefolk in hundreds of villages in the arid countryside west of Madurai. Blamed for habitual cattle theft, blackmail, and highway robbery by British officials throughout the nineteenth century, the entire caste was designated a “criminal tribe” in 1918. For nearly thirty years, all Piramalai Kallar men were fingerprinted and prohibited from leaving their villages for any reason without written permission, radical measures supplemented by an array of experimental measures in “Kallar Reclamation”: compulsory schooling, grants of land, rural cooperatives and training centers, occupational loans and other forms of rural credit. These diverse instruments were applied toward the realization of an official project in maturity articulated repeatedly in state annals from the closing years of the nineteenth century onward: “*weaning* the criminal tribes in the Southern districts [of the Madras Presidency] from their predatory habits.”¹³

“[T]he best and probably the only way to reclaim the Kallars is by giving them property,” a senior Madras Presidency official insisted in 1910.¹⁴ In the years that followed, many official observers described the Kallar predicament as an agrarian problem, taking the arid quality of their native landscape as a “root cause” of criminality and proposing numerous agrarian strategies of moral pedagogy in response to this natural condition. In 1915, a 1200-acre tract of government land at the head of the Cumbum Valley—surrounding the hamlet of Kullappa Gounden Patti—was identified as suitable for an agricultural reformatory settlement

for Kallar households, to be managed by a missionary servant of the American Madura Mission. Revered E. P. Holton, who oversaw this endeavor between 1917 and 1918, portrayed himself as a “Big Brother” working to lift his wards “out of pettiness, laziness and the constant danger of slumping into mendicancy.”¹⁵ Like overseas evangelists in other imperial settings, he and other American mission workers insistently represented their efforts using agricultural images and metaphors—a harvest of Indian souls, for example, “Waiting for the Reapers.”¹⁶ Holton saw in agriculture the prospect of “a better scale of living, for those who are willing to work for it, that is, development of character.”¹⁷ The Department of Agriculture encouraged him to cultivate his own parcel of land as an object lesson for Kallar settlers and “a model which the others can copy” on the lands they were granted themselves.¹⁸

Physical traces of the Kallar Voluntary Settlement on the landscape of the Cumbum Valley are by now very scarce. A virulent outbreak of malaria forced an early closure of the scheme in 1919; police officers were withdrawn from their local encampment, leaving behind the 19 male Kallar convicts and their family members who had been brought to settle on the site. Retrospective narratives in Kullappa Gounden Patti suggest that almost none of the lands once assigned to these settlers now remain in the hands of their own descendents. “They did not have the maturity to clear the land that they had been given,” one settler’s grandson—a Head Constable himself at a local police station—told me one evening. “Drinking, being rowdy... They just sowed some millets and took what came up.”

Within a few years, local officials doled out the lands once reserved for these Kallar settlers to hundreds of other Kallar and Dalit households inhabiting the region. Kallar Reclamation schools were established in Kullappa Gounden Patti and hundreds of other local villages, in accordance with a revamped state strategy for moral maturity adopted in the wake

of the agricultural settlement's collapse. Kallar convicts had playfully named district jails as "schools" in the early twentieth century, E. P. Holton reported in one of his letters on the "Thief Caste" to his American friends.¹⁹ Today, however, the compulsory schools of the colonial era are themselves recollected as "jails" by the descendants of their Kallar wards, some of whom describe throwing rocks as children at their erstwhile teachers and running away to hide in the peanut fields.

The repeal of the Criminal Tribes Act in 1947 led toward the eventual suspension of all Kallar reform measures, except for the 265 government schools still administered under the aegis of Kallar Reclamation. These schools may be found now wherever the Piramalai Kallar caste predominates, although they have since opened to students of all castes. "We are cultivating children," Headmaster Ramaraj suggested to me one afternoon in forceful English on the tidy grounds of the Kullappa Gounden Patti Kallar Elementary School campus. He described how the school aimed to make each student into a "man of word" by teaching virtues such as honesty, propriety, duty, and sacrifice. When we first met, Ramaraj averred that education had indeed transformed the Kallars from thieving "jungle brutes" into teachers and engineers. "They have ripened," he said. But on a later day he leaned in close across his green steel desk for a quieter and more sardonic appraisal: "They will never reform at all."

"We shall make of the Kallar youth a fine race of stalwart, useful, well-behaved citizens who will live for and not on one another," one local authority proudly stated in 1926 while the Governor of Madras laid the foundations for one of the Kallar boarding schools.²⁰ Partly due to the education provided by these schools, the Piramalai Kallar caste has won wide recognition as prosperous and respectable in recent decades. At the same time too, however, it is widely alleged that their newfound wealth and prominence depend upon their singular willingness to

pursue “crooked paths” such as smuggling, racketeering, and other illicit trades. In Kullappa Gounden Patti, such paths have crisscrossed most often the slopes of the state Reserve Forests surrounding the village, with the taking of hardwood timber, blocks of sandalwood, poached animals, and even ganja cultivated on cleared forest tracts.

In the midst of fieldwork conducted in this village, I found that foresters had taken to camping out in the village to stage raids and intercept such goods smuggled down into the plains. One middle-aged forester likened the violence of such policing to the blows that parents and teachers would necessarily apply to children: “A child raised without beating and a drumstick tree grown without pruning are of no use to society,” he insisted by recourse to a proverbial image of closely managed growth. We might find a contemporary echo here of the colonial project, but we must also recall that forest pilferage, like all such illicit paths, depends entirely upon state collusion. Crookedness, in other words, must itself be understood as the maturation of a cultivated disposition.

* * *

A strange sight presents itself with uncommon regularity throughout the arid uplands and hill perimeters of Tamil Nadu: row upon row of spindly and desiccated teak saplings stretching toward the horizon, each of their misshapen boles lending sustenance to no more than a handful of still-green leaves. One such withered carpet of teak spreads over 130 acres of land once reserved for the Kallar Voluntary Settlement in the early twentieth century, on an undulating tract lying between Kullappa Gounden Patti and the Reserve Forests of the High Wavy Mountains. A faded and battered sign planted against barbed wire fencing advertises in

English the proprietors of this estate: “V G P EVER GREEN PLANTATION (LTD).” The enterprise defunct, a few watchmen once hired from the village now have the terrain to themselves. I intercepted them on a looping perambulation through the tract late one afternoon in 2002.

Passing between the spiny columns of teak, guard Rajendran casually tapped a bole here and there to knock off the crumbly red residue of termites. He pointed out saplings they had pruned themselves, and a few gaps in the barbed wire fencing that they had closed off with branches of thorn. “Let the trees grow,” he said. It was their third visit to the plantation that day. “The land is for us. The owners will not come. It belongs only to those who guard it, man,” Chinna Thevar declared before whistling a shrill warning to a gang of boys he had spotted in the distance. Concluding that the lads intended only to pilfer mangoes from in a nearby orchard, they returned their attention to me, and to my questions concerning the afterlife of an audacious and tragic venture that had transformed the landscape of this and hundreds of other Indian villages in the late twentieth century.

Glossy invitations to invest in corporate timber and fruit plantation schemes flooded the English and vernacular presses of India throughout the mid-1990s. In just a few years, thousands of companies popped up to capture as much as \$2 billion in investment capital from the savings of hundreds of thousands of individual households, scattered throughout urban India and beyond.²¹ Companies used these funds to acquire massive expanses of rural land, typically upland tracts close to the margin of hills and forests: dry, fallow and cheap on the market. Print advertisements bore detailed tables and testimonials, promising to potential investors both spectacular rates of return and the certainty of familial advancement through the scientific management of natural bounty. As one such testimonial for Golden Forests (India) Limited suggested, for example, “INVEST WITH AN ORGANISATION WHICH ENSURES

‘MATURITY.’” By 1999, these promises of natural, fiscal, and familial maturation had evaporated. Several newspaper exposés charged plantation ventures with widespread corruption and financial insolvency. The Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) intervened by freezing the assets of many companies and banning them from soliciting new deposits without a legitimate credit rating. Advertisements disappeared, and countless offices shut their doors to hapless investors. The “plantation bubble” had burst.²²

VGP Evergreen Plantations was only one of these ventures. Initiated in 1994 under the aegis of Chennai retail magnate V.G. Panneerdas, the enterprise persuaded 8000 city dwellers to purchase small plots on one of their four teak plantations newly established on several tracts in rural Tamil Nadu, including this plantation on the outskirts of Kullappa Gounden Patti. VGP advertisements represented arboreal growth as a secure and soaring fount of value, binding boles, money and children together in a common lattice of organic maturation. A 1995 Tamil notice published in *India Today*, for example, featured a bespectacled young man in a striped polo T-shirt, smiling at the stethoscope-laden infant he held up in his arms. “To make your dear daughter a great doctor in the future, think and act right now,” advised the caption. Below the picture was a table promising the transformation of Rs.15,500/- into Rs.6,00,000/- over the span of twenty years.²³ The investment was scheduled to mature at the precise juncture when a child’s future would need to be secured with the greatest educational or marital expense. Sketched below the projective table was the geometric growth that would underwrite these developments: the outlines of three teak trees, the apex of their canopies lending three points to an imaginary straight line headed up and out at 30 degrees.

உங்கள் அருமை மகனின் எதிர்காலத்தில் சிறந்த டாக்டராக உருவாக்க இப்பொழுதே சிந்தித்து செயல்படுங்கள்.
(அருமை மாழையை வாங்கும் சென்னை உருவாக்க நினைவு ரூ. 15,500/- மட்டுமே)

முதலீட்டுக்கான வாய்ப்புகள்

தேர்வு	தகவல்	தகவல்
1	கடல்பூ - திட்டம் 1 ரூ. 15,500/- (ஒன்று சென்னை) ஒன்று 1000 க்குமேற்பு ஒன்று 1000 க்குமேற்பு	25 ஆரஞ்சு ஒன்று ரூ. 1,00,000/- ஒன்று 1000 க்குமேற்பு
2	கடல்பூ - திட்டம் 2 ரூ. 2,20,000/- (ஒன்று சென்னை) ஒன்று 1000 க்குமேற்பு ஒன்று 1000 க்குமேற்பு	25 ஆரஞ்சு ஒன்று ரூ. 2,20,000/- ஒன்று 1000 க்குமேற்பு

விநியோகம்
தேக்கின் வலிமை, நம்பிக்கையின் சின்னம் வி.ஜி.பி.

ஆய்வு
உங்கள் அருமை மகனின் எதிர்காலத்தில் சிறந்த டாக்டராக உருவாக்க இப்பொழுதே சிந்தித்து செயல்படுங்கள்.

வி.ஜி.பி. எவர்கிரீன் பிளாண்டேஷன் லிமிடெட்
சார்பெட்ட அமைச்சு
விதிபி பாரிசுரம் அபாதிப்பாளர்
38A, குறைந்த அலுவலக கட்டிடம்,
சென்னை-600 083. தொ: 4825222/23.

“Only if you have belief in future can you come up in life,” Evergreen Plantations Senior Manager Padmanabhan suggested one morning at the enterprise’s headquarters in Chennai, describing how its owner himself “came up from a downtrodden level.” Padmanabhan insisted upon the “technical reliability” of the plantation endeavor, identifying teak as a “commercially valuable tree” that had been cultivated here with the “latest agricultural technologies.”

However, the retired dean of the Tamil Nadu Agricultural University that had been hired by VGP to guide such usage was far less sanguine about their plantations’ prospects for timely maturation. While he could forecast the “genetic potential expressed in nature” as an experimental scientist, the actual growth of plantation trees depended upon the vagaries of field conditions, the vicissitudes of local crop management, and the overall marketing strategy of the company. “We are only planting, planting and managing the trees,” Dean Arumugam

told me: “We do not know how they are selling to customers.” SEBI had in fact prohibited VGP from canvassing further investments by 1999, and the company was forced to suspend its plantation developments and arrange to compensate its thousands of investors. In spite of promised transformations, “the land is as it was, the village is as it was,” Arumugam said.

In the village of Kullappa Gounden Patti, a Tamil proverb sometimes articulated by elder men and women presents an interesting counterpoint to VGP’s advertised images of both natural and personal development. *Maram murrināl vairam, manitan murrināl putti [buddhi]*, the saying goes: “If a tree matures, heartwood; if a man matures, judgment.” The proverb likens the stability of a mature and hardened tree in the face of winds and storms to the steadiness of a mature human being’s life of desire. Maturity is identified here with virtues such as restraint and deliberation, as they are exercised with respect to the body and its sensual desires. From this standpoint, the failure of the VGP plantation in the village uplands is imagined more as a matter of personal failing rather than as an instance of corporate deceit. “Thieving lad,” the local VGP watchmen and others here said about the young company manager who had looked after the tract. They described how he had succumbed to the pleasures of brandy, expensive cigarettes, and prostitution, selling off bits and pieces of the plantation infrastructure—stone posts, coils of barbed wire, gate valves, drip irrigation tubing, even titles to land—to meet his needs as his salary fell into arrears. Manager Suresh Kumar’s body was discovered in the plantation guard shack one morning in 2002, hours after he had apparently taken his own life. Amidst the desiccated teak saplings, at least one tree close to the shack seemed to yielded strange fruit: a small bag of fried sweet dumplings, hanging from a sparse branch for several days until spooked herdswomen forced a watchman to cast them away.

* * *

For agrarian cultivators in the Cumbum Valley, there is no great difference between the maturing of crops and the maturing of children. One morning in the dry uplands just south of the VGP plantation, for instance, I stumbled upon cultivator Sekhar scattering seed beans over long red rows of freshly ploughed fields. He described how these plants would need rainwater to survive, in the same way that children needed milk. And the foreseen stages of their growth, he suggested, were akin to the stages of a woman's life: from a time of childhood to a time of maidenhood—puberty among girls is itself known colloquially as a “flowering” in Tamil—and onward into a time for fruiting and its harvest. Like most people in the region, he described such ripening into maturity as a process of coming into *pakkuvam*: a Tamil term derived from the Sanskrit *pakva*—to be cooked, ripened, refined, or perfected.²⁴ In the case of both crops and children alike, maturity was a matter not only of a state to be attained, but also of the ripeness or fitness of the conditions in which such maturity was sought. The maturation of children depended upon the maturity of their parents, a condition that could by no means be taken for granted in an environment of moral uncertainty. And the maturation of crops, by analogy again, depended upon the condition of the soil in which they were raised.

On another chilly morning expedition to these dry upland fields a few months later, for example, cultivator Vairam Pandian greeted me with the following words: “A good *pakkuvam*.” He was speaking not of a crop—indeed, that morning he was supervising the movement of a tractor over three acres of fallow uncultivated land—but instead of the soil through which this machine was working. Pandian was pleased: one week after a hard rain, it was a good time to plough. To till the soil too soon after a rain was to struggle with thick blocks of clayey matter,

but to wait too long on the other hand was to risk its untimely hardening. Crouching to pick up a small clump of soil and to show how it crumbled gently between his fingers, he explained how this softness of consistency would be obtained only if the soil was tilled at the correct time. The kind of ripeness or maturity at stake here was therefore a question of both proper conduct and fortuitous timing: it concerned the “disposition” to act appropriately, as well as the “favors of nature” that would render such acts timely and effective. In this case, Pandian’s sister-in-law had lent a portion of her salary the previous evening so that a tractor could be hired out at the right moment—“till it according to its *pakkuvam*,” she had told him. But in other instances, he explained, maturity was more clearly a matter of ripened inclination. Did a young girl have the *pakkuvam* to judge when to pluck ripening beans from a stalk? Or did a young man have the discipline to earn and provide for a family of his own?

As it happened, young men were collectively derided by their elders in the village as “empty fellows” unable to distinguish idle pleasure from fruitful avocation. Therefore, when the Kullappa Gounden Patti “Youth Club” decided to field candidates for the village panchayat elections in 2001, *pakkuvam* or maturity was a necessary topic of intense discussion among these young men. At a meeting called to canvass candidates for the upcoming contest, one of the leading youths in the organization evoked a proverbial image of immaturity to grapple with this problem. “It is said that ‘A crop planted by young children will not reach the house,’” Muthukumar reminded the others present, emphasizing a need for unwavering care rather than unreliable haste. These proverbial words, echoed by one other young man named Jegadisan that night, would have made some tangible sense to most of the youths attending the meeting: many worked as daily wage laborers in the grape orchards of the valley while their applications for salaried employment remained pending. And the advice would appear to

have worked, as the Youth Club succeeded in winning two public offices in the elections that year, negotiating even for the post of village vice-president.

Muthukumar and Jegadisan—like most of the young men in the Youth Club meeting that evening, as well as the middle-aged cultivators Vairam Pandian and Sekhar mentioned earlier—belonged to the Piramalai Kallar caste, and one might identify in their common concern for maturity an echo of the colonial strategies imposed upon their predecessors. However, we cannot leap so easily here to conclude that we are faced with no more than an unanticipated reverberation of colonial moral pedagogy, however powerful that may have been. Their language of *pakkuvam* betrays a debt as well to south Indian religious traditions, and the ripeness of devotion they have elicited for centuries from pupils and devotees. Medieval Tamil Saiva poetry depicted pious disciples as ripened stalks of paddy, bowing down with the weight of a full devotion to divinity.²⁵ Popular accounts of *pakkuvam* in the Cumbum Valley often dwell upon the possibility of an interior state of oneness: a steady and unwavering focus of the mind or heart upon a single object of attention, recollection, love, or struggle. Young Kallar men described, for example, their keenness for a romantic love that was mature and “sincere” in its centering of thought, memory, desire, and sensual experience upon one locus of attention—one’s own lover—rather than the sensory abandon of a more “thievish” and meandering romantic indulgence. We may discern a similar concern at work even in the proverb voiced by Muthukumar at the Youth Club meeting that evening: the prospect of a harvest that would fail to ripen along a steady path home, compromised by the wavering attentions of its cultivator.

Although Tamil devotional literatures often rely upon the image of seed and fruit to sketch the trajectory of a ripening soul, these texts emphasize as well the necessary role of

divine agency in returning to individuals the fruit of their deeds. In much the same way, cultivators and other rural citizens of the Cumbum Valley affirm the essential contingency of terrestrial ripening: devotion alone to agrarian endeavors does not suffice to ensure the realization of their ends. Farmers here routinely describe agriculture as a game of chance: subject to forces far beyond the toil of individual cultivators, and yielding as unpredictably as a lottery ticket, a dice game, or a round of cards. These analogies may be extended much more widely. In the raising of crops to maturity, as in the care of children, or the practice of devotion, or even the pursuit of election—this too a kind of “agriculture,” I was told—eventual returns of cultivating labor are a matter of inescapable accident and contingency. The firm convictions of colonial agrarian pedagogy notwithstanding, cultivators in the Cumbum Valley today find no guarantees that their work to ripen plants will ensure their own moral ripening as persons. The vicissitudes of organic development trouble any such faith in steady progress. People too may ripen out of time, like the vegetal stalks in which they find their doubles: some too early to yield any good, others too late for redemption.²⁶

* * *

This essay on modern south India has sketched three scenes, perhaps even parables, of maturity: its prospects and limits, its histories and afterlives, its unpredictability and openness when conceived and exercised as an organic course of transformation. These scenes have each presented distinctive faces and concerns, but they have overlapped as well, with respect to their themes and trajectories as well as with regard to their material terrain of cultivation, maturation, and development. Taken together, they are intended as means of rendering and

sustaining an image of maturity as a kind of ripening. This image is one, I have suggested, that brings the potential development of both subject and nature into a common frame, rather than taking the maturation of one to entail a necessary transcendence of the other. We have also found a reminder, in these varied instances of ripeness both anticipated and confounded, of the inescapable contingency of maturation as a process of development, its inextricability from situations of encounter, accident, and chance. Evidence of maturity or its absence call for neither recognition of attainment, nor condemnation of failure. Instead, these sketches of diverse and often unexpected outcomes are meant to convey the essential plurality of the modern subject under postcolonial conditions: its open constitution at the interstices of rival horizons of potential improvement, development, or transformation.

With each of these three instances, furthermore, I have confronted a teleological process of cultivation—a campaign of moral uplift, a project in financial gain, an endeavor to till the soil—with a Tamil proverb concerning maturation and the conditions of its realization. These proverbial images of pruned trees and beaten children, of ripening heartwood and maturing judgment, of immature cultivators and crops that fail to come home, may each be seen as assertions of natural truth: of turning to the permanence of nature in order to insist upon the firmness of certain kinds of cultural claims. I want to suggest, however, that each of these proverbs may be taken to bear their own historicity, their own openness to mediating a possible maturity. “A proverb,” Walter Benjamin has written, “is a ruin which stands on the site of an old story and in which a moral twines about a gesture like ivy around a wall.”²⁷ The image of nature cloaking this argument is meant to remind us that such utterances arise from traditions of storytelling founded upon the living authority of counsel.²⁸ Counsel, Benjamin suggests, “is less an answer to a question than a proposal concerning the continuation of a

story which is in the process of unfolding.”²⁹ For Benjamin, these stories are matters not just of folk or fairy tales but of experience as such, experience taken as a process of unfolding. In this sense, the proverbs to which I have turned may themselves be taken to affirm the historicity of the subject of maturity. They rely, that is, upon the mutability of terrestrial life itself to make possible arguments about incipience.

The openness of the incipient forms of maturation that I have described here may appear to rob us of any ground for faith in their eventual realization. And indeed, the present stands as a strikingly difficult time for cultivators throughout much of India [PP]. Scarce rural credit, plummeting water tables, precipitous fluctuations in market prices and other routine difficulties have driven many farmers to spurn this vocation in the Cumbum Valley, as in many other places elsewhere. “Let our troubles end with us,” many men and women told me, underscoring a desire for their children to study well and do anything but work upon the land. They often described the present as an age of machines, its codes and rhythms fixed from afar by these insensible vanguards of newness. Cultivators of agrarian terrain—displaced as ploughmen by tractors, competing as laborers with mechanical threshers and harvesters, racing as farmers to glean the latest pesticides and seed varieties, wrestling as producers with the vagaries of prices fixed in distant global markets—fell out of step with its momentum all too easily. “Countless lives here, caught at the wrong time,” I even found myself musing in fieldnotes penned one frustrated morning in the midst of fieldwork in 2001, my own reflections caught in the machinery of a Hegelian historiography. “I can’t help but think,” I went on to write that day, “as I look out at ploughs churning through the mud, at women bent over sowing fields bit by bit, at farmers and their farming, that these are living relics, detritus caught up in the slowly spinning water on the edge of the river... History is made elsewhere...”

We have indeed come in recent years to identify the maturation of novel forms of life with many other kinds of places: with the city, the factory, the laboratory, the school, and even the dark blueprint of prisons and concentration camps. The countryside is easily imagined as an antithesis of these places: trapped under the weight of ossified traditions, a space that that must be urbanized, organized, mechanized, or simply left behind if some semblance of contemporary relevance is to be attained. From such a vantage point, the very possibility of reconciling maturity and *modernity* on such terrain may appear unthinkable. And yet, I have tried to suggest here that we may try to *salvage* such a prospect from such terrain and the forms of experience appropriate to it, if we take “salvage” as a mode of critically engaging the present by dwelling upon the visible ruins and persistent remnants of its pasts. “The peasant as citizen,” Dipesh Chakrabarty has observed, “keeps looking like a relic of another time.” But we may also seek out a certain kind of critical potential among such relics, Walter Benjamin has reminded us, his “angel of history” transfixed by the piling debris of progress but also finding in this “garbage heap” a means of imagining modernity itself in contrary terms.

It is for this reason that I conclude with one final image of both natural thought and natural life, one that may be taken to challenge the very standpoint from which such an existence appears stagnant and archaic. We may acknowledge that for the rural citizens of the Cumbum Valley, the earth as ground of life is always ripening itself. Maturation does not simply happen to transpire upon its face, but is the very principle that yields its depths and surfaces. Diamonds ripen in the earth. Stone itself ripens. And the soil fails to burgeon forth overwhelmingly only because cultivators cut away its *sakti*, strength, or force through the crops they harvest from it. There are paths to be found among the forms of ripening that the earth allows. Some fail to flourish and they disappear—their lineages are said by their peers to

have gone *tarisu* or “fallow.” Many others leave this milieu to seek their prospects elsewhere, finding that to be a cultivator at this present moment is to be nothing more than a *patti kaattan*, a vestigial rustic or savage. But there are others still who remain and become cultivators, gambling with the earth for a possible fruit. This essay is composed with the conviction that their experience—however shaken by the trials of the present—bears lessons for the modernity that we share. And we may even find a certain resonance with these lessons on more familiar grounds. As Henri Bergson wrote in the early twentieth century, “to exist is to change, to change is to mature, and to mature is to create oneself endlessly.”³⁰

¹ Immanuel Kant, “An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?” in *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1983), 41. David Owen traces of a lineage of post-Kantian philosophical reflection concerning maturity through the work of Nietzsche, Weber, and Foucault in his *Maturity and Modernity: Nietzsche, Weber, Foucault and the Ambivalence of Reason* (London: Routledge, 1994). The question of maturity for these thinkers, he writes, concerns “the relationship between the possibility of autonomy in modern culture and the realisation of this possibility” (216).

² “Progress” itself became a singular and collective term in the eighteenth century, Reinhart Koselleck has observed: a name for the universal horizon of possibility toward which all humanity may develop under the right conditions. See his “‘Progress’ and ‘Decline’: An Appendix to the History of Two Concepts” in *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 218-235.

³ See especially his essay on “The Prose of History, or The Invention of World-History” in *History at the Limit of World-History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 24-47.

⁴ Guha, *History at the Limit*, 36, 39.

⁵ Guha, *History at the Limit*, 42.

⁶ Guha, *History at the Limit*, 6.

⁷ Guha, *History at the Limit*, 94.

⁸ Guha, *History at the Limit*, 78-9.

⁹ This last problem was posed with great acuity by Dipesh Chakrabarty in his “Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for ‘Indian’ Pasts?,” *Representations* 37 (1992): 1-26.

¹⁰ David Ludden, “India’s Development Regime,” in *Colonialism and Culture*, ed. Nicholas Dirks (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 247.

¹¹ On the political and conceptual stakes of conceiving of “nature” other than as the ground for a “naturalization” or essentialization of given conditions, see Donald Moore, Anand Pandian, and Jake Kosek, “The Cultural Politics of Race and Nature: Terrains of Power and Practice,” in

Race, Nature, and the Politics of Difference, ed. Moore, Kosek, and Pandian (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 1-70.

¹² Many of the arguments that follow are developed more fully in my *Crooked Stalks: Cultivating Virtue in South India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

¹³ Board of Land Revenue, Board's Proceedings (Misc), No. 33, 6 January 1896, Tamil Nadu State Archives (TNSA). Emphasis mine.

¹⁴ Note by Cardew, 7 August 1910, G.O. No. 2683 Revenue, 15 August 1910, TNSA.

¹⁵ EP Holton to Friends, 21 October 1918, and EP Holton to WE Strong, 6 July 1918, ABC 16.1.9, v22, American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions Records (hereafter ABC), Houghton Library, Harvard University (HLH)

¹⁶ I refer here to the title of an early-twentieth-century pamphlet available in the American Madura Mission Records at the United Theological College Archives in Bangalore. UTC.

¹⁷ EP and GS Holton to Friends, 29 May 1905, ABC 16.1.9, v17, HLH.

¹⁸ Short note on the Kallar Settlement, G.O. No. 2092 Home (Judicial), 12 Sept. 1918, TNSA.

¹⁹ EP Holton to Friends, 21 October 1918, ABC 16.1.9, v22, HLH.

²⁰ G.O. No. 966 L, Public Works and Labor, 6 August 1926, TNSA.

²¹ See George Mathew, "Lost in the Forest of Deception," *Indian Express*, February 16, 1998.

These companies capitalized on booming export and domestic markets for fruit, government incentives for horticulture and wasteland development, and an ongoing public discourse on deforestation that lent trees the solid assurance of soaring value.

²² "Plantation Bubble," *Indian Express*, 29 January 1999.

²³ *India Today*, Tamil edition, 21 July to August 5, 1995.

²⁴ The Vedas deploy the term *pak* figuratively to evoke a maturing, ripening, or perfecting of substance. In the ritual traditions of Vedic Brahmanism, the duty of the Brahmin is to "cook" the world through sacrifice, Charles Malamoud argues in his *Cooking the World: Ritual and Thought in Ancient India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996). The argument holds as well for the selfhood of the sacrificer, he suggests: rituals of consecration, that is, subject the being of the sacrificer to a process of cooking through the alchemy of heat.

²⁵ A. Sankari, *Periya Purāṇaṭṭil Uvamaikaḷ* (Nagercoil: Gemini Press, 1975), 75-6.

²⁶ These arguments are further developed in the third and fourth chapters of my *Crooked Stalks*.

²⁷ Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Observations on the Works of Nikolai Leskov," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 3, 1935-1938*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 162.

²⁸ On the place of proverbs and other elements of counsel in the moral traditions of south India, see my "Tradition in Fragments: Inherited Forms and Fractures in the Ethics of South India," *American Ethnologist* 35 (2008): 466-80.

²⁹ Benjamin, "The Storyteller," 145-6.

³⁰ Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution* (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2005), 10. Bergson works here to extend the potential for open-ended change beyond the domain of conscious beings.