Assertion, Negotiation and Subjugation of Identity: Understanding the Tamil-Malayali Conflict in Munnar

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Abstract

Social identities play a critical role in the various phases of conflict. Existing literature often examines the role of social identity of groups in inducing conflict in heterogeneous societies. This article puts forward the view that the role of identity is not limited in terms of inducing conflict, but it also plays a vital role in influencing the dynamics of conflict. Based on this conceptual framework, the article outlines the conflict dynamics observable in the Kannan Devan Hills village in Kerala, where several factors, over the course of time in the last century, have led to the perception of conflict between the Tamils and the Malayalis. As a major objective, the article identifies the issues and processes of social interaction between the two groups that necessarily influence the nature of the conflict. The article identifies that the conflict between the two communities, though mostly latent, can be seen through three important aspects: assertion, negotiation and subjugation of identities. Through assertion of identity, the conflict is perceived over ethnic lines, whereas the process of negotiation and subjugation of identity constantly undermines the ethnic nature of conflict to specific grievances, thus giving insight into the dynamic nature of the conflict.

Keywords

Identity conflict, Tamil, Malayali, plantations, Kannan Devan Hills village, Munnar

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I. Introduction

The interactions between multiple identities in social structures are prone to conflict due to the real and perceived incompatibilities. Identities are context-specific constructs that are often not primordial and are relative to the narratives bound by history, society, culture and politics that are overlapping in nature (Jayaram, 2012). In the interaction of identity with conflict, literature has often focused on the conflict-inducing nature of identity, associated with certain interests or grievances, that can include social, economic and political interests or are understood on the basis of the values of an identity. While some scholars study the realistic interests or the objectives that induce conflict, others leverage the social identification aspects and analyse the value-centric nature of identity, where identity may be independent and in itself an inducer of conflict (Al Ramiah, Hewstone, & Schmid, 2011; Goldstein & Rayner, 1994). Similar to the interest and value approach for understanding identity, conflict is also understood on the basis of the incompatibilities of interests and values. Galtung (2009) attempted to correlate the interest and value components in various stages of a conflict. At the stage of latency, conflict is articulated to be interest bound, and at the stage of manifestation, it is observed to be value bound (Galtung, 2009).

Galtung (2009) further stated that conflict, as a system, varies between the stage at which it is conceived to the stage at which it is resolved and is often observed to be dynamic. Similar to the dynamism of conflict as suggested by Galtung (2009), when conflict as such is viewed through the prism of identity, it is not only linear from the stage of conception to resolution but is also relative to the changing nature of identity. The process is understood when the assertion of identity acts as an inducer of conflict, whereas the negotiation of identity mediates between the interest and value components of a conflict, and the subjugation of identity undermines, if not resolves, the conflict. Although the three elements of identity appear to be linearly connected in the form of one following the other, they can also be present simultaneously due to the continuous and multidimensional interactions that take place in the society between the same actors. This leads to an appearance of a context-specific oscillation between positions among these three aspects in various issues. This phenomenon is understood on the basis of empirical data collected in the course of fieldwork undertaken in the Kannan Devan Hills village in Munnar Gram Panchayat, Kerala.

The Kannan Devan Hills village in Munnar Gram Panchayat, Idukki district, is about 45,689 ha in area and has a population of about 55,738 people (Census of India, 2011). It is important to understand that even though the Munnar Gram Panchayat was officially formed on 24 January 1961, the role of the panchayat and the plantation companies often overlaps in occasions that involve the provision of utilities, roads and social welfare. This limits the practical separation of plantations from the village barring few panchayat wards that are concentrated around the village centre. The plantation industry has a significant influence on the formation of the village society. A symbolic gesture of this influence on the village can be highlighted when one comprehends that the village was named in honour of the tribal chief 'Kannan Thevan' who introduced the place to the British

planters in the nineteenth century (Deepika, 2010; Nalapat, 2010). The village that is locally known as 'Munnar' has witnessed a growth in tourism over the last few decades. The two industries played a role in changing the demography of the village, which gradually has led to the social political and economic conflict between Tamils and Malayalis. The Tamils are dominant in this village that is in Kerala, which is otherwise dominated by Malayalis.

The major objective of identifying the multiple grievances that emerge in the interactions between Tamil and Malayali identities when they share common political geography warranted a qualitative methodology. An ethnographic survey was conducted in the village in a phase-wise manner from September 2017 to June 2018. The ethnographic survey involved the use of a structured question-naire with open-ended questions and rigorous maintenance of field notes that covered ground-level observations. More than 200 respondents were identified from different households and wards within the Gram Panchayat. These respond-ents were interviewed to understand their perspectives on multiple issues as individuals and as members of various groups. The narratives of history shared by the respondents were compared with the available literature to understand the transition of the village over time.

The article is divided into six sections including the introduction. The first section after introduction engages with the historical backdrop of the region which later came to be identified as the Kannan Devan Hills village. This section further interacts with the elements of the physical and political geography that resulted in the emergence of Tamil and Malayali groups in the village. The subsequent section highlights the increase in interaction between the two groups and consequential conflict that is observed along with the assertion of Tamil identity. The succeeding section engages with the flexible nature of identity where the sociopolitical institutions actively attempt to negotiate the Tamil identity by separating the grievances on specific interests and, in this process, limit the value-centric nature of ethnic identity in conflict. The penultimate section deals with the two aspects of subjugation that influences the conflict between the groups. In this section, one form of subjugation is identified to be fuelling the conflict, whereas the other form reduces the intensity of the conflict as a minor infraction. The conclusory section of the article reflects on the flexible nature of identity and its responsibility towards the emergence and changing intensity of the conflict.

II. Tamil Identity and Formation of the Village Society

The conflict between Tamils and Malayalis can be understood in terms of the various levels of social interaction that accompanied the temporal transformation of the village. A major milestone in this transformation was the setting up of plantations. Munnar's climate and location were both highly suitable for the cultivation of cash crops that had a global demand and furthered the growers' economic as well as political interests (Baak, 1992; Nalapat, 2010). The British planters were interested in the region because of its economic potential (Munro,

1880), and the Travancore government also saw scope for benefitting financially from the agreement without much investment (Baak, 1992). According to historical narratives of the advent of the plantation industry, the region was obtained as concession from the Poonjar royal family, who were under the directive of the Travancore kingdom. The concession was made to John Daniel Munro, the British resident at the Travancore court, on the basis of the first 'Pooniat Concession' in 1877 (Nalapat, 2010). Although the plantation sector also attracted Malayali plantation entrepreneurs, who represented the dominant population in the Travancore state, they were often discouraged by the politically and economically strong British (Baak, 1992).

Tamils were dominant in the region even before the emergence of the plantation industry. The Tamils who had migrated along with a refugee Pandian prince from Madurai were the major settlers in the region (Munro, 1880, p. 15). The inhabitants mostly belonged to the tribal community called *Muduvars* [Muduvans], and when other areas were included in the region, as part of the high-range area, then *Vellalars*, *Pellerys* and other minor communities also became part of it (Munro, 1880). The initial settlers helped clear pathways and assisted in the initial setting up of the plantations, but their numbers were not sufficient to meet the rising demand for labour in the plantation (Nalapat, 2010). Munro (1880) recorded that the total population in the region was 2,500. This number was later found to be not enough for the plantation purpose, and hence, the search for more labour became necessary (Nalapat, 2010).

Several factors influenced Tamil dominance in the workforce. The primary reason for this was the change in the plantation crop in response to global conditions. Initially, when coffee was the chief crop, the workforce was mainly Malayali, who made additional income since the crop required only seasonal labour (Baak, 1992). The change in cultivation from coffee to tea transpired due to two major factors. First, there was a political and economic need to compete with Chinese tea (Nalapat, 2010). Second, the price of coffee was falling in the international markets (Baak, 1992). The tea trees thus grown required constant care and maintenance; this resulted in the search for permanent labourers who could reside in the plantation and a reduction in the Malayali workforce. The plantations created more work for public works departments and other state institutions that created job opportunities for the Malayalis, both inside and outside the village, but more often in connected regions outside the village (Baak, 1992).

The region's proximity to Madras Presidency meant that it was easier to avail labour from Madras Presidency than from the Travancore state. Munro (1880) had identified the route from 'Odumella Petta' [Udumalaipettai] in Madras Presidency as the best suited for cart transport and collection of provisions. Along with provisions, the workforce also had migrated from the regions in the Madras Presidency, where social conditions were driving people out of their settlements (Nalapat, 2010). The plantation companies opened up recruitment camps in these villages where labour was easily and cheaply available due to poor economic conditions (Baak, 1992; Nalapat, 2010). The 'Kangani' system of labour was practised to supplement these efforts. In this system, a Kangani or contractor brought in labour from a village by paying their debts. The labourers also took

this opportunity to improve their social and economic conditions (Baak, 1992; Nalapat, 2010; Raj, 2018).

The Kangani system and the recruitment camps in Madras Presidency, and later the Madras state, made Tamil labourers who were from the economically backward sections of the society predominant in the labour force. The workers who moved into Munnar were housed in homestead accommodations within the plantations. In the course of time, the plantation companies provided them with several facilities that included water supply, electricity, firewood, groceries, salons, crèches, schools and hospitals. Over the years, several families shifted base to Munnar, although some continued to maintain their ties with their villages. They also brought members of their extended families and friends who were seeking job opportunities. Marital relationships within the newly formed communities also created the next generation of workers, because there was a demand and they were familiar with the work culture of the plantation. The fear of possible punishment through the Travancore Criminal Breach of Contract Act of 1865 for leaving the plantation jobs also had the bearing on the continued engagement of some workers in the plantation (Raj, 2018). The workers who came from Tamil Nadu also brought their religion, castes, rituals and practices that contributed to the social and cultural aspects of the society (Nalapat, 2010). This resulted in a homogeneous and localized Tamil identity that engaged in plantation labour, but the advent of tourism industry influenced a change in the social composition of the village.

Tourism brought about the second major transformation in the village. The improved connectivity with Munnar, and the transformation of the area into a landscape of well-maintained tea trees surrounding the lush green mountainous terrain with a pleasant climate, started attracting tourists into the village. The rise in the number of tourists started transforming the local economy. The place became attractive for running tourism-related businesses, and the Malayali population started to return to take advantage of the business opportunities in the region where the British had bested them earlier. The plantations emerged during India's pre-independence era; during this time, the British used political and financial power to dissuade Malayali ventures in the plantation sector (Baak, 1992). Even after India's independence in 1947 several agreements made before by the sterling companies continued to be valid, and this again limited the entry of Malayalis in the plantation sector a second time. Few members of the Brahmin, Nair and Syrian Christian communities were given an advantage by the Diwan of Travancore in some plantations in the region (Raj, 2018), and these activities were limited in the Kannan Devan Hills village. The opportunities of tourism were different from that accommodated by the previous plantation agreements. The support extended by the Kerala government to tourism overcame the monopoly of the plantation companies in the region, to some extent. The change in demography that followed the tourism industry did not drastically change the population of Tamils and Malayalis in terms of their numbers, but it did lead to an increased interaction between the Tamils and Malayalis, which revealed that a Tamil identity was different from a Malayali identity.

The Tamil and Malayali communities were different in various ways, the primary basis of separation being language. The Tamils spoke Tamil as their

'tai mozhi' or mother tongue, and the Malayalis spoke Malayalam as their 'mathrubasha' or mother tongue. Apart from language spoken, the skin tone was often used by both communities to distinguish each other. The Tamils were considered to be darker in complexion than the Malayalis. When the Malayalis spoke Tamil, or when the Tamils spoke Malayalam, identity profiling based on complexion became a common practice. Up until the 1990s, dress and dwelling were also used to differentiate between Tamil plantation workers and Malayalis. The Tamils were often thought to be shabbily dressed and lived in homestead houses rather than their own houses. Although some of these differences were bridged later, some factors continued to be issues of contention. These differences and their long-standing grievances over social, economic and political issues led to the emergence of a distinct Tamil identity that began to assert itself against the institutions that were perceived to favour the Malayalis.

III. Assertion of Tamil Identity

The Tamil-Malayali conflict emerged when the Tamils perceived that they were at a disadvantage compared to the relative advantages enjoyed by the Malayalis from social and political institutions. This perception fuelled the conflict with Malayalis over land, livelihood and the competition for scarce resources that were social, political and economic in nature. The major grievance of the plantation labour in the state stemmed from landlessness (Rammohan, 2008), and this was also the case in the Kannan Devan Hills village.

   The grievance over land had two main elements. First, it was related to emotions, and second, land as a material asset. The emotions often originated from an absence of a sense of belonging, and land became the means of laying claim to the region. The major question was anchored on the emotional attribution of whether the land belonged to the dominant Tamil population who had lived in the village for several generations or the Malayalis who were the majority in Kerala. The term 'waris' or heir became an important aspect of asserting identity that was related to the place and the origin of plantations to stake their legitimate claim to the region. This claim of inheritance also countered the forces of alienation of the local Tamil identity from being devalued as migrants from other states. In recent years, the plantations in Munnar have begun recruiting labour from Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Odisha (Anandan, 2018; Raj, 2018). The economic and social conditions of other state workers from the northern belts were relatively weaker in comparison to the Tamils (Raj, 2018). The fear of being clubbed together with other state workers in sharing welfare measures that may get distributed objectively may have been influential in asserting a dominant Tamil identity to highlight subjective grievances and claim legitimacy to the region at the earliest.

   The influence of plantations on the village, and the general nature of work and accommodation, meant that several generations of workers were engaged in plantation activities and continued to be part of the village population. This abridged the gap between a plantation worker and a settler in most cases. Present-day settlers in the village, including those working in the plantation or engaged in

other activities, are mostly the descendants or relatives of those who worked in the plantations. To these people, tea bushes and trees have an emotional value component. For some, the village is where their ancestors lived and died and where they themselves have grown up and had families. These various emotional attachments, acclimatization and familiarity with Munnar were among the several factors that prevented most people from relocating to their ancestral villages. The Tamils had a greater attachment to the place they had known all throughout their life than the place mentioned only in the stories told by their forefathers, and hence the inheritance was often focused on this village rather than their ancestral ones in Tamil Nadu.

Land as an asset is important for constructing houses for shelter or as a source of revenue. Land also functions as collateral to generate capital for business. A significant geographical area in the village was under the lease and ownership of various plantations, and the remaining area was with government institutions, that included the forest and revenue departments. The Kannan Devan Hills (Resumption of Lands) Act of 1971 and the Kerala Private Forests (Vesting and Assignment) Act of 1971 were passed by the government to free land from the control of plantation companies and provide land to the landless (Udayabhanu, 1973). These were met with resistance from plantation companies who filed cases in the higher courts. Although the decision went in favour of the government in the Supreme Court (Udayabhanu, 1973), the success of these laws is debatable. The Socio-Economic Caste Census (SECC) conducted in 2011 records that only 8.2 per cent of the households own land, out of a total household count of 13,314 in the village. Rammohan (2008) argued that plantation sector in the state was excluded from the land reforms that took place in the 1970s, since the acts of 1971 did not contribute much towards resolving the problem of landlessness among plantation labourers.

The Tamils who were the dominant labour force in the plantations were among the most adversely affected. The Tamils who came to work in the plantations were housed in homestead accommodations called *lines*. *Lines* are horizontal alleys of sheeted or tiled houses with a common wall. These houses have one room and a kitchen. The toilets were constructed later to prevent the spread of disease (Nalapat, 2010). The accommodation in *lines* was provided to the workers on a temporary basis, until the end of their employment with the company. The supervisory and managerial staff are also provided accommodation, and some of them received multiroom cottages and bungalows depending on their job profile and nature of association with the plantation companies. Irrespective of the profile of the job, the accommodation is temporary and is expected to be vacated or razed, at the end of the employment tenure. The line houses are part of the village, and government identity cards including the voter identity card were issued with the address of *lines*. The temporary nature of houses was part of a widely perceived problem along with the scarcity of 'legal' lands in the village to build houses.

The empirical data from the field showed that at the end of their job tenure, some Tamil workers refused to move out of the homestead houses. The common practice followed by these people was to avoid collecting the gratuity and pension after retirement, thus creating a situation where the people and company continued

to have an employee–employer relationship that indirectly justified the occupation of the company house. To these people, the monthly pension was much less than what a rented house would cost, and hence it was an economic choice. The temporary nature of the accommodation meant that they had to find alternate accommodation once their tenure with the company ended. In order to deal with the immediate need for accommodation, some families shifted to homestead houses of their near and distant relatives, who worked in the plantations. Although this created unfavourable living conditions, where large extended families were staying together in one-room houses, it also created internal cohesion between Tamil families. The cohesion at a family level was not limited to the sharing of accommodation. Landlessness was in itself a bond builder, since the emotional attachment to the place was often the only 'asset' transferred, and hence the attachment to the place was stronger in the absence of the transfer of large material assets. The absence of land transfers as inheritance also prevented the possible conflict that commonly occurs during the distribution of family wealth (Titus, Rosenblatt, & Anderson, 1979). The concentrated transfer and distribution of memories and responsibilities associated with the place without many material assets made the issue of landlessness a primary promoter of group cohesiveness, even as the absence of land as an asset was perceived as a grievance.

The conflict acquired an ethnic colour when permanent solutions were sought by former plantation workers. The former workers who were Tamils attempted to resolve the issue of landlessness by encroaching on government land and constructing houses and colonies close to the village centre where they could find new jobs in tourism or related sectors. The Malayalis who came to exploit the economic opportunity provided by tourism also built resorts and other businesses near the village centre. The Malayalis who were dominant in state politics were able to use their influence over the local administration to build on the land that was contested by the Tamils. This gave the Tamils a tacit legitimacy over their earlier possessions and promoted further encroachments. When the Tamils and Malayalis started to share common spaces in real estate, the interaction furthered the assertion of ethnic identities. The Tamils perceived that they had a more justifiable claim on the land, as they needed to build houses for shelter, unlike the Malayalis who were interested in the economic prospects of tourism. The text of the Land Resumption Bill (2010) passed by the Kerala legislative assembly lays emphasis on tourism, but there is no mention of rehabilitation or provision of land for the landless. Since the majority of workers on the plantations were landless Tamils, the wage issue did not come within the purview of ethnic divisions. The competition for economic resources and livelihood means was majorly dependent on the emerging tourism sector that divided the groups on the basis of ethnicity.

Munnar became a hub for ecotourism because of its varied flora and fauna (Rammohan, Soman, & Joseph, 2015). The Tamils realized that the beauty of the region which was leveraged for tourism was created from the sweat and hardship of their ancestors. This legitimized their claim to deriving equal benefits from tourism. The Tamils however were not at a complete disadvantage. The Tamils had an advantage over Malayalis as sellers of perishable commodities such as spices, fruits and vegetables in the village centre. It was common for them to

bring these commodities from the neighbouring districts of Tamil Nadu that had a similar climate but where the cost of production and transport were less. Tamils who had capital were able to exploit this opportunity, and often these were people who had their base in Tamil Nadu. Since the Tamils did not own land, it meant that they had limited ability to generate capital, and thus, they often found themselves working for Malayalis in establishments in the tourism sector.

In case of direct competition too, the Malayalis were more successful because their networks spanned other tourism sites in Kerala. Munnar's close proximity to Cochin International Airport meant that some tourists depended on tour operators or taxi drivers to find reasonable and safe accommodation in Munnar, and often this led to a commission-based exchange of business that the Malayalis in Munnar were able to negotiate with the Malayali tour operators and taxi drivers in other parts of the state. This difference also extended to the targeted clientele in the tourism sector. The Malayalis and Tamils were catering to clientele on the basis of their economic status. The Malayalis who had better access to funds were able to build better infrastructure and facilities. They could afford to employ qualified and educated people in their organizations to target a relatively high-paying clientele. This also brought in the angle of class difference between the Tamils and Malayalis.

The Malayalis also had an advantage of knowing languages other than Malayalam since many of them were educated in schools and colleges, in the neighbouring districts within the state. The schools in Kerala often offered basic training in Hindi along with English. Proficiency in Tamil was an important requirement in the early days of the plantation. The managerial and supervisory staff were required to take a proficiency test in Tamil to test their ability to communicate with the dominant Tamil workers (Nalapat, 2010). The plantation executives' interaction in Tamil and Tamil-medium schools may have led to the continuing popularity and use of Tamil among workers. It was also common for the Tamils to use their caste identities to get admission in community-run colleges in Tamil Nadu. In these educational institutions, languages like Hindi were not commonly taught. This meant that it was easier for the Malayalis to communicate with the tourists coming from North India. The issue of language was not limited to the prospects of tourism, and the advantage of mother tongue was perceived by the Tamils to be an important mode where partiality was shown to the Malayalis by Kerala.

The increasing interaction with the state bodies and the flourishing tourism in the village meant that those who only spoke Tamil were at a disadvantage, and this was even felt by those sections of the society who appreciated learning Tamil in local schools. The village being part of the political geography of Kerala meant that the official language was Malayalam. The circular (2014) issued by the Kerala government on the official usage of Malayalam would have had implications in a village where the majority of the population are Tamils. The interaction between Tamils and Malayalis meant that both at least could speak each other's language. Tamils who were unable to read and write in Malayalam had difficulties dealing with official government documents and applications. This limitation meant that the Tamils were dependent on people who were proficient in Malayalam.

This dependence also contributed to the perception that they were likely to be treated unjustly by the Malayalis who may benefit from the unsaid partiality extended by Kerala. The Malayalis' ability to influence local bodies for acquisition of land and starting of businesses with relative ease also may have fuelled this apprehension. The sense of grievance was much higher in interaction with police and enforcement officials because the Tamils perceived that the documents in Malayalam could likely land them in legal complications and traps, more so in case of disputes with Malayalis.

IV. Negotiation of Tamil Identity

Negotiation is an important aspect of conflict, as it is an attempt to reduce the intensity of a conflict within a society to support interaction and good relations. The interactions between different groups in a society are much higher than conflicts that are often episodic in nature (Pruitt, 1995). Negotiation attempts to highlight those interactions that benefit both parties, and in the process, it attempts to separate major and minor grievances (Pruitt, 1995). The Tamil identity assertion in Munnar is specific to a regional identity that indirectly placed the political status of the village under a Malayali-dominant state. A specific regional identity also can be inferred as the need to continue living in the village, and the willingness to continue engaging with the political system, that the Tamils were familiar with. The differing intensities of the interests and the value components of the Tamil identity assertion enabled the separation of major and minor grievances. The negotiation of the Tamil identity was to some extent successful in preventing an overt conflict. The process itself was possible due to the presence of sociopolitical institutions, like trade unions and political parties.

Trade unions and respective political parties were active in the region from the early 1950s. The labour protests under strong leaders in the plantation estates around Munnar and other regions in the state gained national attention and led to the passing of the Plantations Labour Act by the Parliament in 1951 and the Kerala state legislative assembly in 1952 (Varghese, 2010). The trade unions were actively involved in the protests for labour-related matters in the plantations (Jayachandran, 2015; Raj, 2018). Trade unions and political parties played a significant role in the negotiation of Tamil identity whose assertions were related to specific grievances of a marginalized society. The village is socially and economically marginalized, where nearly 70.9 per cent of the population consists of Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes and 91.4 per cent of the household's highest earning member's income is less than ₹5,000/- (*Socio Economic and Caste Census: Munnar Gram Panchayat*, 2011). The trade unions and political parties mediated with government bodies and plantation companies to address the grievances that were leading to Tamil identity assertion and the negotiation of Tamil identity.

The trade unions and political parties conducted several measures to address the various grievances. As an immediate solution for landlessness, the utility services to houses occupied by retired workers were not terminated by the plantation

companies due to the involvement of trade unions. The trade unions mediated with the companies to continuing the utilities on humanitarian grounds, even as legal proceedings for evicting the illegal occupants of the houses were ongoing.

People who encroached on government land to overcome their landlessness lived under constant threat of eviction on the basis of illegal occupation and environmental fragility. Munnar is considered to be one of the most environmentally fragile zones in the state as shown by floods in 1924 (Nalapat, 2010) and 2018 (Central Water Commission, 2018). The Kerala government's Committee on Environment's first report (2017) highlights the unscientific construction and waste management in Munnar, along with other factors being environmentally unfriendly. The government often took action to reclaim the encroached land, the Munnar eviction drive in 2008 was one such action. The drive was considered to be a failure because of the resistance from locally strong political organizations (Ibrahim, 2009). The reasons for the opposition were lack of policy clarity and also the intervention by plantation workers (Jayachandran, 2015). The policy clarifications and interpretations of reports are often made by the leadership of trade unions and political parties who work at the ground level and who strongly oppose those policies of the state government that are perceived to be against the interest of people, while promoting those that are in the interests of the local population. Governments have been giving *pattaya bhoomi* or 'ownership of land' in specific areas of the Munnar Gram Panchayat over the years. The trade unions along with their respective political parties played a significant role in identifying the households eligible for receiving land in a phased manner. In some cases, these documents are delayed due to red tape and constantly required mediation and intervention by trade unions and political parties.

The trade unions and political parties with their political influence often resolve or are expected to resolve the grievances over livelihood, by validating and pushing forward the cases of natives through government schemes under reservation quota and mediating the services of financial institutions. A significant number of people in the village belong to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (*Socio Economic and Caste Census: Munnar Gram Panchayat*, 2011), and this limits job opportunities in the village under the reservation quota. Government jobs and financial assistance in case of wild animal attacks are also routed and mediated through these sociopolitical institutions. The trade unions and political parties most often control cooperatives and other financial institutions. The provision of loans for setting up businesses through public and private institutions, including private money lenders, required recommendations from a trade union or party leader who informally provided integrity and character certificates. Even setting up temporary shacks near tourist spots within the village requires the support of trade unions and political parties.

Along with the abovementioned factors, the trade unions and political parties are able to use their own social composition in negotiating the Tamil identity. The leadership of trade unions and political parties consists of a mix of Tamils and Malayalis from the village, who are able to connect with people, beyond their ethnicity. Both Tamil and Malayali leaders were able to mediate issues relating to police and other enforcement departments. In the leadership tussle within the

institutions, the Tamil leaders negotiated their identity, with their political aspirations beyond the village, in mind. The Tamil leaders in the trade unions and political parties depended on the Malayali leadership at the district or state level, to fulfil their political aspirations for a career beyond the village. The Munnar Gram Panchayat comes under the Devikulam assembly constituency. The constituency is reserved for Scheduled Caste communities, most of whom are Tamils, but the decision of candidature often rests with a party's higher administration that is dominated by the Malayalis, so it was up to the Malayali leadership to decide 'which' Tamil would contest the elections. This directly has a bearing on how Malayalis were generally viewed as decision-makers, and this reason intensified the process of restricting grievances from becoming ethnically focussed.

V. Subjugation of Tamil Identity

The process of subjugation is observable in two forms that have different influences on conflict. First, subjugation supplemented the assertion of identity by creating the perception of threat and thereby contributed to the emergence of conflict. In Munnar, the introduction and usage of Malayalam as an official language was seen as an imposition of Malayali culture, and the perception of Malayali dominance in sociopolitical institutions contributed to the feeling of Tamil subjugation.

Second, the intensity of conflict through the Tamil identity was negated as minor infractions in the overall interaction that occurs within a society. In this process, the Tamil identity was deliberately subjugated by both the Tamil and Malayali groups in the region to give attention to only the grievances that were brought forward through negotiations. This process of subjugation was actively undertaken by trade unions, political groups and members from within the Tamil and Malayali communities who realized the negative implication of a conflict over ethnic lines.

The term 'waris' or 'heir' was reinterpreted by the leadership in their interactions as *Munnar Makkal* or 'people of Munnar,' by shedding the assertive legitimacy claim of a Tamil identity to a peaceful expression of shared regional identity that is common to Tamils and Malayalis living in the region. This process of the subjugation of Tamil identity was legitimized by reducing the conflict to a sibling rivalry in an *Annan-Thambi* or 'brotherly' relationship. The subjugation of Tamil identity may also be a logic-bound action to move away from the ethnic nature of conflict to a brotherly relationship tussle in the backdrop of an increasing inflow of migrant labourers from other states from within the country. This approach of in-group forming can be understood from early literary works, and Coser (1956) had proposed that new threats and new out-groups are important in creating solidarity within groups. Subscribing to the Coser's (1956) notion, it is rational to believe that the in-group formation between the Tamils and Malayalis is possible due to the shared history of interactions in the region. The differences between the two groups who are familiar to each other are less pertinent than the possible threats from unfamiliar outsiders, especially from the northern belt of India with even more distinct languages and cultural practices. The Tamil and

Malayali anticipation of a possible threat from other state migrants could have facilitated the solidarity between the two groups to combine as 'people of Munnar'. This was possible due to the presence of active trade unions and political parties with members from both communities.

Since the early twentieth century, trade unions and political parties have maintained a working relationship with each other and the people in the region. These organizations are often territorial and do not allow new competition to challenge their areas of operations. They do not want to lose their territories through a merger of the region with Tamil Nadu. In 1956 and 2012, the 'Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam' (DMK), a dominant party in Tamil Nadu, demanded the merger of the Devikulam taluk, of which Kannan Devan Hills village is a part, with Tamil Nadu (*The Hindu*, 2012). In 2015, the rise of *Pembilai Orumai* or 'women's united' was seen as a movement that seemed to distance the labour-related issues from trade unions and political parties in the region (Kamath & Ramanathan, 2017). As soon as the *Pembilai Orumai* was formed in 2015, it had to face allegations of colluding with the 'All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam' (AIADMK) for creating divisions in society on the basis of caste and language (Saikiran, 2015). The political aspirations of the leadership in trade unions and political parties remain dominant in the village. The attempts to grow beyond the limits of the village are necessarily dependent on maintaining the status quo in the village where the politics is based on class, rather than ethnic identities.

The possible emergence of caste identity as a successor to a Tamil identity in the village also fuels the need to subjugate the Tamil identity. Caste identity divisions are a phenomenon in some educational institutes in Tamil Nadu (Yamunan, 2016). The youth who travel to Tamil Nadu for education are exposed to caste politics due to community-bound interactions in campuses and hostels. These youths return to the village with a greater affinity towards their communities due to the community exposure they receive in Tamil Nadu. The trade unions and political parties perceive that the emergence of community identities will be accompanied by the emergence of new leadership that could influence local politics. This perception also drives the subjugation of the Tamil identity and in the process makes the conflict more dynamic.

VI. Conclusion

The Kannan Devan Hills village society in Kerala was formed in response to the demands of the growing plantation industry, which in turn was influenced by global trends. The social demography of the village in Kerala with a large population of Tamils in comparison to the Malayalis had a bearing on the access to the location, climate and the type of crop preferred by the plantation companies. In this process, there was a significant migration of socially and economically backward Tamil labour into the village, both during the time of the Madras Presidency and post the formation of Madras state that was later renamed Tamil Nadu.

The plantation period was followed by a boom in the tourism industry both in Munnar and in Kerala. The demography of Munnar began to change with the inflow of Malayalis who were interested in exploiting the opportunities provided by tourism. Tamils and Malayalis competed for social, economic and political resources in the context of grievances over land, livelihood and favouritism. The grievances as a result of these competitions led to the assertion of Tamil identity and conflict with Malayalis on ethnic lines.

Sociopolitical institutions, like the trade union and political parties, played a significant role in negotiating and separating the interests from the values of the Tamil identity to address the issues behind grievances. The Tamil identity was also deliberately subjugated by institutions and community members themselves, to prevent new entrants from exploiting the conflict, and in this process, they were able to momentarily stem the conflict. The relationship between the changing nature of identity in the dynamicity of the conflict can be seen through these interactions.

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