
“Every Place Has Roads in the Plains”: Public Spaces and Private Markets in Arguments for Development and Inclusion in South India

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Abstract: In this article, I examine the connections among roads, development and notions of inclusion. How might local people understand a road as having the potential to bring a stronger sense of inclusion and belonging to peripheral communities? How is this related to specific ideas of the meanings of development and prosperity? Using the example of actions in four villages in the Kolli Hills, Tamil Nadu, India, I argue that demands for the construction of a new road to the lowlands reflect farmers’ assertions of their desire for greater inclusion through the extension of the public space that constitutes a road. I examine the ways that public transportation spaces intersect with consumption practices and access to the private, market-oriented sector. This reflects specific notions about livelihoods, social identities and the meanings of development held by small farmers living in the case study area.

Keywords: development, transportation infrastructure, markets, identity, south India

Résumé : Dans cet article, je m’intéresse aux liens entre les routes, le développement et les notions d’inclusion. Comment les résidents locaux comprennent-ils qu’une route a le potentiel de renforcer les sentiments d’inclusion et d’appartenance au sein de communautés périphériques? Comment cela est-il lié à des idées spécifiques relatives aux significations du développement et de la prospérité? En prenant comme exemples des actions intervenues dans quatre villages des collines Kolli au Tamil Nadu en Inde, je formule l’hypothèse que des demandes pour la construction d’une nouvelle route en direction des basses terres reflètent l’affirmation par les fermiers de leur désir d’une meilleure inclusion, par l’extension de l’espace public que constitue une route. J’examine comment les espaces de transport public recoupent les pratiques de consommation et l’accès au secteur privé, axé sur le marché. Cela reflète des notions spécifiques relatives aux moyens de subsistance, aux identités sociales et aux significations du développement partagées par les petits fermiers dans la région à l’étude.

Mots-clés : développement, infrastructures de transport, marché, identité, Inde du Sud

In this article, I examine the connections among roads, development and notions of inclusion. How might local people understand a road as having the potential to bring a stronger sense of inclusion and belonging to peripheral communities? How is this in turn related to specific, locally-constructed ideas of the meanings of development and prosperity? Using examples from four villages in the Kolli Hills, Tamil Nadu, India, I argue that demands for the construction of a new road to the lowlands are not simply demands for access to transportation. Rather, farmers are asserting their desire for greater inclusion through the extension of the public space that constitutes a road. District-wide attempts to get government approval for the construction of this road represent a claim for greater inclusion in the social fabric of the nation and are an assertion of a more engaged form of citizenship.

Issues of belonging and inclusion in India have been explored through analyses of the imagined nation (Chatterjee 1993), ethnicity (Baruah 2003), religious tensions (Pandey 1999; Zacharias 2004), media (Manekkar 1993; Zacharias 2001) and language (LaDousa 2005), gender and the body (Chatterjee 1989; Hancock 1995; Ramaswamy 1998), local development (Isaac and Franke 2002) and empowerment (Sharma 2006), public spaces and education (Lukose 2005), indigenous knowledge and education (Sundar 2002), political struggle and caste (Kunnath 2006), and resource control and development (Agrawal 2005; Sivaramakrishnan 2000; Subramanian 2003). Much of this research considers experiences of inclusion in terms of national projects, policies, tensions and images, while some of the work focuses on localized understandings of what it means to be a citizen in India. Subramanian’s (2003) work in villages in Tamil Nadu, for example, draws connections between resource-management, local belonging and citizenship. In making my argument, I expand on Subramanian’s approach to questioning village–nation relationships; that is, I build on understandings of how

experiences of belonging and inclusion are articulated at the local, grassroots level.

Discourses of access to public spaces such as roads are one way that groups and individuals may define themselves and their degree of integration and inclusion. Such discourses can intersect with other conceptualizations of identity, including notions of degrees of being “developed.” Geographic isolation tends to go hand-in-hand with distance from product markets, which affects income, economic opportunities and labour markets (Blank 2005; Partridge and Rickman 2007). Moreover, without access to public, state institutions, whether they regulate education, social order, health care or transportation, people may feel that they are being left behind and overlooked (Goldstein 2003). Using data from ethnographic fieldwork, I examine the ways that public spaces intersect with consumption practices and access to the private, market-oriented sector. This reflects specific notions about livelihoods, social identities and the specific meanings of development held by farmers living in the case study area.

Background and Methodology

Covering an area of 282 square kilometres (Kumaran et al. 1998), Tamil Nadu’s Kolli Hills support a population of approximately 37,000 Malayali small farmers. The Hills are accessible via a single paved road from the lowlands, as well as various unpaved walking paths. This road has been extended to many districts within the Hills themselves; some districts, however, continue to be without road access. Electricity and telephone access are also very limited in some areas.

This article is based on fieldwork examining issues of agricultural and dietary transitions, development and environmental change. Field visits during 2003, 2004 and 2006 lasted between two-and-a-half and six months. I worked with four adjoining communities in Thakkali Nadu district in the Kolli Hills.¹ Each community has a population of less than 250. Villagers are Malayali, a designated government Scheduled Tribe, and the primary livelihood in the area is farming. Although there is some economic differentiation within and between communities, for the most part, research participants owned and farmed less than five acres of land. Markers of relatively limited economic differentiation include the ownership of televisions or motorcycles, tile instead of thatch on house roofs and children who continue in their schooling to higher grades. Only three participants did not own land, working instead as agricultural labourers or renting land from others in the area. Sweet cassava, a cash crop used in the lowland sago-starch agroindustry, is the main agricultural product in Thakkali Nadu. Some households also grow small amounts

of rice and mixed vegetables for home use. Sweet cassava, locally referred to as tapioca, became a viable crop approximately 18 years ago when a road into the district was completed.

Research methods included participant observation, focus group activities and the creation of conceptual land-use maps to demonstrate land-use changes and priorities. The body of the research was conducted through semi-structured interviews. In total, 107 villagers from four villages were interviewed. Seventy-eight of the interviewees were women, the remainder men. The ages of interviewees ranged from 18 to 85 years old. Most interviewees, however, were in their late 20s to early 50s. Many participants were interviewed on multiple occasions, depending on themes and issues raised in earlier interviews and on whether they had the time.

My discussion focuses on qualitative analysis, on the meanings and experiences of marginalization in these particular communities. I am not attempting to make statistically-informed arguments. Random sampling, for example, was not used to contact potential participants as this may have given villagers the very problematic impression that they had no choice but to participate. Rather, in the early stages of the research, households and agricultural fields were visited and villagers were asked if they would be interested in participating in the research. Due to a 2002 preliminary visit in which I discussed with groups of farmers the possibility of my coming to their community, many people in the district already had a sense of why I was in the area. Upon arriving and making arrangements to stay in one of the research communities for an extended period of time, I began to explain my research questions and methods in more detail. During the early days, research questions were refined and re-focused to better address issues of interest and relevance to community members.

Perceptions and Experiences of Marginalization

In the Indian context, Agrawal has noted that there is a tendency in ethnographic writing to construct Indian villages as though they are “independent centres of civic and political life” (2005:110). This is problematic since any village, or series of adjacent villages, is inevitably embedded in political, environmental and economic contexts that can play key roles in the shaping of identity. These villages may not be part of the image of the core or urban nation, but they are nevertheless affected by decisions, actions and practices that are undertaken in and emerge from lowland and urban areas. They may also be defined in opposition to urban centres, both by the self-defined main-

stream citizen, and by marginalized villagers themselves. This is certainly the case in Thakkali Nadu, where cultural identities, geographical location and economic options emerge as key identifiers of what it means to live in this rural district, rather than in an urban, lowland setting.

The Malaiyali are a designated Scheduled Tribe. Although the term *adivasi* is more popularly and academically used to refer to tribal people in India, in this paper I use the terms *Scheduled Tribe* and *tribal* in order to reflect the language used by research participants. *Adivasi* is not a term that is used locally; rather, small farmers more typically use the term *tribal* in their discussions of life in the Kolli Hills; less frequently, *Scheduled Tribe* is used, particularly when farmers discuss government policies, projects and concessions.

The position of indigenous people in India, as in much of the world, is highly variable. In the Northeast, for example, Scheduled Tribes are the majority, and special provisions ensure that they control most of the state governments (Baruah 2003). In other areas, tribal groups maybe viewed as easily relocated or displaced in the name of development programs. This has been demonstrated in the struggles around the Narmada Valley hydroelectric and irrigation dams, a series of projects that primarily affects tribal people in terms of displacement and loss of land (Baviskar 2003; Kapur 1993; Kurian 2000). Popular, academic and governance constructions of tribal people might hinge on notions of backwardness and “primitive” practices, positioning tribal peoples as in need of both protection and surveillance (Basu 1996; Das 2000; Naik 2000). Thus, indigenous populations in India can be understood as special kinds of citizens, which by the nature of their so-called backward state, are carefully provisioned for through state programs, but are nevertheless marginalized. In Tamil Nadu, for example, special provisions include girls’ hostels at educational facilities, access to certain economic schemes such as sericulture and seed programs and access to health care assistance (Gopaluni 2002). However, Suguna (2002:9) has suggested that participation in these kinds schemes may be “make believe stories” promoted by various governments, while Menon (2004) notes that the principles set out for tribal governance and development are not necessarily reflected in policies and realities. Tribal people may be provisioned for but they may also be positioned as outside of full participation in state affairs, at least, beyond the special provisions for legislature inclusion. Baruah (2003:45) calls this “protective discrimination,” a term that reflects the notion that tribal people require special care.²

In the case of the Kolli Hills Malaiyali, particularly in more isolated districts, such special provisions do not com-

pensate for the multiple kinds of marginalization experienced. Many areas continue to lack access to reliable electricity and drinking water, roads, education and telephones. Where road access is limited or non-existent, Hill inhabitants may have a difficult time getting to markets to purchase necessary food and other goods. This is particularly the case during rainy seasons, when heavy rains can make walking paths to the lowlands impassable.

Thakkali Nadu is one of the more geographically isolated areas in the Hills. Although it is accessible by road, the trip is long and slow. Inhabitants are dependent on the government bus service, which only passes through the area twice a day. The area is located several hours from the central administrative centre of the Hills, which contains a number of important services including a hospital, a bank, the local electricity offices, access to the only road leading to the lowlands, and a major market for both buying foodstuffs and other goods and selling various kinds of fruit and vegetable produce. The distance from the administrative and market centre of the Hills is problematic in two ways. First, reliance on the limited bus transportation schedule makes it impractical for villagers to purchase food products in the market areas. Instead, most households take walking paths to the lowlands where they purchase basic supplies for a one- or two-week period. Second, the distance from this central area affects the transportation costs of tapioca harvests. Farmers in Thakkali Nadu must contract with truck owners to transport their harvests to lowland mills. Distance compounds the cost.

Distance from the lowlands also means that farmers face other disadvantages when engaging with the market economy. In particular, they are dependent on lowland tapioca mill owners and have little in the way of negotiating power for crop prices. Once farmers harvest and transport their tapioca to the lowlands, it is impractical and financially impossible for them to return it to Thakkali Nadu should they encounter sale difficulties. As one 29-year-old farmer pointed out, “they [lowland mill owners] decide the rate, and we have to take it. Even if [the rate] is low, we can’t bring [it] back here, so we must sell it.” A 37-year-old man further highlighted market disadvantages when he said, “if we sell it to the mill owners, we will be cheated. They will say [it] is not good, and give us less ... and we will not be able to get the money on the same day. They will say to come after some time, and they will say we did not bring the tapioca.” Profit, therefore, depends on more than simply favourable growth conditions. The unreliability of mill owners means that many households sell their tapioca through a broker who is preferably local. They pay a fee for this service, but feel

that this is more reliable than accompanying a crop to a lowland mill. Tapioca cultivation is, therefore, a potentially risky economic activity. Yet, there are few other economic options, a situation that is at least partially perceived as a consequence of the district's relative isolation. As one 27-year-old farmer said, "here we don't have any other work choice, like a factory. We work in our land only." This lack of options speaks of economic marginalization that leaves people dependent on the land.

Geographical location also means that Thakkali Nadu inhabitants have limited access to many goods and services including household items, health care and education. In contrast, many villagers feel that lowlanders have relatively easy access to these and other services. This is reflected in discussions of what it means to have a Malayali tribal identity. Thus, living in the Hills is constantly contrasted with living in the lowlands. If it is difficult to buy fresh milk and vegetables in Thakkali Nadu, the lowlands are conceptualized as a place where such products are readily and easily available. Or, as one 40-year-old man illustrated, if getting to a hospital is problematic in Thakkali Nadu, particularly during emergencies, then lowland communities, even small villages, are viewed in terms of having easy access to many doctors, "near Rasipuram [a lowland town], there is one place called Pattai [a lowland village]. There are five or six doctors there. But here in this village there is no one. If we want to go to the doctor, we have to go by the two-wheeler [motorcycle] or bus, a long distance."

While such constructions are highly idealized in that they do not recognize the economic, social and other factors that can realistically restrict lowlander access to such desired goods and services, they nevertheless are a powerful indicator of the ways that farmers in Thakkali Nadu perceive and experience various forms of marginalization. In particular, life in Thakkali Nadu tends to be conceptualized in part in terms of what villagers feel they do not have—access to desired services and goods that are conceptually linked with specific ideas about development. This lack of access to such items signals exclusion from desired forms of development. For many research participants, the proposed new road functions as a symbol of their hopes for economic and social development and future prosperity; in so doing, it also functions as a symbol of inclusion and voice.

Signs of Development and Governance

Gupta (1995) notes that local-level institutions can be the most immediate way to encounter the state in rural areas. Indeed, despite local concerns about access to goods and government-provided services like education, the area is

not devoid of visible signs of government social services and development initiatives. In Thakkali Nadu, the elected panchayat president is well known, as are former presidents, and in 2006, houses still sported graphics representing the three candidates for the 2005 panchayat elections. In 2006, the palm-print sign of the national Congress Party was ubiquitous, reflecting positions in the national election campaign that had been held in 2004. The Tamil Nadu government provides and runs schools, *balwaadis* (child-care centres) and a Primary Health Centre. In late 2004, a Tamil Nadu government-funded public toilet facility was in the process of being constructed, a first for the area; it was completed in 2005. There are electricity lines and government-funded lights in public areas. There are also new, well-paved roads between the villages in the district. Moreover, the workings of the Tamil Nadu government services are visible through signs announcing information such as village boundaries and statistics and in annual, well-organized and well-attended polio vaccination campaigns.

The nature of these services speaks to specific state-village-individual relationships. These are relationships that are defined by periodic encounters with health, educational, and other service institutions and by feelings of frustration on the part of the villagers. There may be annual polio vaccination campaigns for individual young children but the Primary Health Centre is not staffed, partially due the difficulty finding someone willing to stay in the relatively isolated district. There may be schools but these schools are chronically understaffed and students may arrive to find that they are without teachers for the day. Government-financed roads between villages in the district may help with local transportation between individual households, but to get to the lowlands, villagers must continue to take a long, inconvenient route or are otherwise relegated to using walking paths. Even the public toilets, an initiative that was welcomed as an important infrastructure development, were constructed too close to a public well, leaving many villagers concerned with the possibility of drinking water contamination. The toilets remain locked and unused.

These experiences point to a complex and haphazard relationship with the mechanisms of state-determined development-oriented services, in which these services are provided in a limited way, often with good intentions, but not necessarily based on local development priorities and concerns. They signify a disparity between government and local perceptions of specific, precise development needs and expectations (see Sivaramakrishnan 2000). Current services in Thakkali Nadu only partially engage with the priorities and concerns of local people,

positioning them in terms of recipients of projects, rather than as active participants in determining the shape and nature of initiatives.

The Road to Development?

At this point, I turn to my discussion of the local struggle for a new road to the lowlands. If the above markers of government-identified development priorities only partially reflect local development goals, then a new road to the lowlands, in contrast, is an initiative that locals conceptually link with real implications for positive change and economic prosperity. In Thakkali Nadu, farmers have attempted to increase their engagement with the state and with private sectors by pushing for the improvement of state-controlled transportation infrastructure. There are other examples that demonstrate attempts to more fully engage with inadequate state structures, including a movement to improve the quality of education in village schools by hiring private teachers to supplement state government employees.³ However, it is the road that best demonstrates perceptions of marginalization, concrete, material notions of what development means, and local agency.

First, however, it is necessary to point out that the complexity of communities means that inhabitants may be divided both about projects and the means to undertake these projects (see for example, Goldstein 2003). In Thakkali Nadu, some villagers do not wish to participate in the struggle for the road, feeling that it is the sole responsibility of government agencies to undertake these projects. Moreover, a few of the villagers I worked with expressed concerns about the potential negative effects of the road, including concerns about women's safety should more strangers begin to travel through the area, or the need to watch children more closely should large trucks frequently start driving along the narrow roads between and within villages. Nevertheless, the ways that research participants spoke about the proposed road—both privately and in groups—was typically highly positive. Thus, when asked about the potential good and bad implications of a new road, responses included statements such as, “for us, the road is only good” (47-year-old man), and, “the road brings only good things ... the transport charge [for tapioca] is very high this way ... if it comes this way, the charge will be less...If the bus comes [on the new road], we can sell the fruit and come on the next bus. And the body can relax, instead of getting up early and walking [down to a lowland market]” (woman in her late 30s).

Moreover, the road is conceived as something that would be a step toward economic security and development options. What are some of the predominant ways

that small farmers in Thakkali Nadu conceptualize “development”? Development in these communities takes on specific materialities, as well as more abstract notions. This is not uncommon in South Asia. Pigg (1992, 1996) for example, has demonstrated that in rural Nepal, being “developed” has many connotations for villagers, some of which imply ideas of modernization through improved access to certain economic opportunities and commodities. Development can also take on connotations of access to education and a decrease in the amount of hard, physical labour necessary in daily life. Klenk (2004) has found that women in parts of Northern India associate development with intangibles such as empowerment, political voice and self-confidence. Organizations like SEWA (Self Employed Women's Association) have development goals that focus on promoting the self-reliance of women through the provision of small loans and the organizing of women into collectives and trade organizations (Chen and Snodgrass 2001).

As alluded to above, in Thakkali Nadu, development is typically associated with structures and opportunities available in the lowlands. These lowland development advantages are both material and intangible, and include better food diversity, a greater range of employment and livelihood options, increased financial stability, access to hospitals and doctors, and access to reliable schools and other state services.⁴ Having access to these services, as well as household goods and economic options, was often discussed as living a more developed or “civilized” lifestyle. Such beliefs were exemplified by one 30-year-old woman, who stated,

I feel that we don't have the same lifestyle as in Salem and Namakkal [lowland city and town]. We are always in the field from morning to evening...the standard of living is different. I feel we need a lot of development to become like people down [in the lowlands]. Because they are living in towns and nearby towns, so they have more chances to make a living.

While a 40-year-old man stated,

When we compare to the plains people, the Kollimalai [Kolli Hills] wants to be developed somewhat. Every place has roads in the plains. There are different kinds of shops like bookstores, hotels. If they want it, they can get it, but here it is difficult. Same with hospitals...if any relation came, they can go and get milk and vegetables in the shop itself. But here we go once a week to the markets.

Yet, if development takes on specific material connotations for many, it can also be thought of in intangible

ways; it is not simply understood as infrastructural modernization and efficiency in accessing goods and services. Rather, it is also articulated as a process of ongoing social change. One young woman spoke spontaneously and passionately about the road in terms of women and empowerment. Although the term *empowerment* was not specifically used, she conceptualized the road as bringing opportunities for women and girls to better see and experience the range of options that are available to their counterparts in the lowlands. Having spent time in the lowlands finishing a post-graduate certificate program, she was aware of the opportunities available, and articulated the ways she believes a new, direct road to the lowlands could improve the lives of women. Although she spoke of the road and development in terms of similar material notions used by other villagers, she moved back and forth between such perspectives and notions of isolation as a barrier to both innovation and women's development:

Town places are nice to live in. They can get water. There are nearby shops. And we can mingle with different kinds of people. Here it is the same caste people and same relations. So we cannot get good, new ideas and changes from them. New things cannot be done here ... Nowadays people are carrying jackfruit by their heads only. If the road came they could send by bus. And they could sell vegetables ... Here the women are not developed. But if the road comes, the women will see other women working in different jobs. Here the women are not like that. But seeing it, the ladies will become interested ... And ladies can go alone outside. Now some ladies are too shy to go alone [without husbands]. If they want to go outside and the husband is not there, they are shy. But if the bus came, two or three times they could go and not be shy any more.

In this way, the new road is sometimes discussed in terms of continuing a process that began with the construction of the old road; a process that, for example, brought new information and new styles of dressing to Thakkali Nadu. Thus, one mother of four speaks of the old road as beginning this process, stating, "we get more information and our knowledge is better. By mingling with the outside people. After the road came, there were some changes in the village and people by going and seeing the outside places. And their ways of dressing. Before we didn't wear nighties. Only saris or half saris."⁵

At the same time, others view these changes as partial and inevitably stalled without a direct, short road to the lowlands. Thus, another 30-year-old woman highlighted the changes that she experienced, and her hope for new changes that she associated with a new road:

There are some changes in the people since electricity and roads came. Now more children are going to school. The way of dressing is different. Fewer dirty clothes, more than two or three dresses. When we are going outside, we wear neat dresses. If the [new] road were finished, there would be a lot of changes. It would be easier to buy what we need. There would be lifestyle changes. We would see more the townspeople and their behaviours.

Thakkali Nadu residents have proposed a new ten-kilometre road that would bring them and their agricultural goods to the lowlands in under an hour. This is in contrast to the current road, on which it may take up to a day, with bus connections, to get to the lowlands. Should the new road be constructed, villagers argue that it will bring some of the diversity of experience and lifeways that they see outside of the Hills. For example, many anticipate that if it were easier to get to their district, businesses might be encouraged to set up in the area. Professionals such as doctors might be willing to open offices, or make weekly trips. Moreover, there would be the opportunity to open roadside shops and stalls to cater to the new traffic that would begin to come through the area.

Requests for this proposed ten-kilometre road have so far met with little success. The struggle goes back to the mid-1970s, a time when some local politicians were able to convince the District Collector, the key Tamil Nadu state official for the geographical area that included the Kolli Hills, to walk the hill paths from the lowlands to their *nadu* (a local-level political unit). Although this tactic is understood as playing a key role in the decision to extend the current road into the district, it did not result in the construction of a more direct route.⁶

More recently, villagers have restarted the push for the new road, which can be traced back to the shift to growing the cash crop tapioca in the 1990s. With the increasing conversion of land to tapioca fields, households began to have more consistent access to a regular, unprecedented cash income. One consequence of this was that many households began to contribute to a common fund used to pay for political actions and agitations regarding the proposed road. While some resent contributing money to the common road fund, and others cannot afford to make contributions due to poor landholdings or limited tapioca profits, this is in other cases referred to as working together for the "common good" of the completion of the new road. As one 30-year-old woman put it, "people are getting together to work for the common good. A committee has been formed to work for that [the road] and to send petitions. They collect signatures from people and send the petition. They also collect money."

As a result of these kinds of collective actions and funds, farmers have been able to organize and pay for road-related actions. These include letter-writing campaigns from individuals and women's self-help groups, printing and posting of posters and signs around the Kolli Hills, articulating reasons why a new road is necessary, and the organizing of district-wide rallies in places where state politicians appear. This last tactic is particularly dependent on collective funds and household economics, since it requires the hiring of trucks to transport people to these locales, and also requires that farmers are able to take a day away from working in the fields. Although a few key organizers for these events have been particularly committed to organizing and maintaining the struggle, the creation of community common funds means that these tactics have increasingly become the purview of numerous households, rather than simply being confined to the wealthier or more politically powerful households (see Finnis 2006 for more details on this process). Moreover, it is important to note that although some of the key organizers have been involved in formal local politics, others have not been formally politically active; rather, they have operated from the belief that the road will improve everyday life in their communities.

On one level, an analysis of the desire for the new road suggests that it is viewed in terms of local economies. A shorter road means paying less to get tapioca to market; it also means that people will pay lower premiums to bring heavy commodity goods such as building materials, televisions and metal clothes bureaus into the district. It will be easier and less expensive, to access a range of food items, and it may lead to new economic opportunities that farmers increasingly feel are important. This is particularly the case since farmers increasingly view tapioca cultivation as unsustainable. Problems with soil quality and pests are contributing to decreased yields and ongoing agricultural concerns. This focus on economics and economic opportunities points to the ways that the public space of a road is conceptually linked with access to and inclusion in private, market locales.

Public Roads, Private Markets

Conceptualizations of development that focus on access to goods, services and economic diversity, demonstrate a specific economic materiality to collective identity formation that has implications for development strategies (Medina 1997), and also point to perceptions of consumption-citizenship relationships. The rise of consumption in India has been proposed as a "new terrain" for considering the mechanisms of inclusion in the nation (Lukose 2005:508-509). That is, an examination of the links between

private markets and public spaces demonstrates the ways that local understandings of inclusion intersect with experiences of what it means to be a citizen in a pro-consumption state. In Thakkali Nadu, by drawing on specific ideas of what development means, villagers are employing a discourse of equal access to public spaces and institutions. However, they are not arguing for equality in terms of more traditional issues such as the ability to participate politically. Technically, they already have this kind of equality. Rather, they are arguing for equality in terms of access to the market and the means of consumption—those opportunities that are primarily reserved for lowlanders and city dwellers, at least as socially imagined by Thakkali Nadu inhabitants (see Guano 2004). They want the material objects and lifeways that they associate with the lowlands. These materialities hinge on well-developed and well-connected roads. The lack of a direct road to the lowlands is one way that Thakkali Nadu villagers articulate internalized perceptions of exclusion (Bartolomei et al. 2003), in that "every place has roads in the plains."

Thus, the physical spaces occupied by roads can be conceptualized as a reflection of unequal social relations (DeVerteuil 2000). Roads are everywhere in the plains, they lead to everywhere important, and lowlanders are imagined and discussed as ready consumers, due to their access to the public spaces of state-maintained roads.⁷ Yet, in Thakkali Nadu, the roads are few and only lead to other places in the Hills. This lack of road infrastructure clashes badly with local expectations and also with neoliberal economic practices that are now central to India's development and business realms. In neoliberal states, where citizenship, economic opportunities and development are inevitably rhetorically and practically linked (Lazar 2004), the problem of the lack of roads also necessarily limits participation in other state mechanisms, including those private mechanisms that are supported by state policies. The limiting of such state-provided, public spaces (see Lukose 2005) also contributes to limited participation in other public realms, particularly the educational realm.

As noted, the current road into the district is credited as starting the path to becoming more "developed," and in the process, allowing farmers in Thakkali Nadu to become more like people living in the lowlands. In particular, it opened the district to a much more intensive relationship with the market economy through the introduction of the cash crop sweet tapioca.⁸ The resulting income, although fluctuating from year to year, has enabled households to access a number of consumer goods and services, including electricity connections, more changes of clothes, motorcycles, televisions, and in some

cases, access to lowland, English-language schools for children.⁹ However, these changes are understood as only partial, just a step towards becoming truly “developed.” A more direct road would improve access to goods and services. It is this kind of access that is understood as the *essence* of development. Thus, one 23-year-old woman argued that, “only one fourth of the people [in this area] are more developed ... After the road comes, there will be some changes.”

One anticipated potential change is the opening of factories that would provide people with a weekly wage. While villagers may be unclear about the nature of these potential factories and what exactly they would manufacture or process, the appeal of a weekly wage is strong. This was clearly articulated by a middle-aged man who contrasted the income earned by agricultural labour with other kinds of work. If agriculture as a primary livelihood strategy is understood as risky and does not promise a regular wage, this is not how people imagine factory work:

If there is a big factory, giving work to more people, it will be useful. We can get daily money and buy vegetables. But in the field only sometimes there will be work. But if there is any factory, throughout the year we will be working in the factory itself. And we will get a good amount of money.

This sentiment was echoed by members of his family, including his young daughter who understands factory work as a key identifier of life in the lowlands. The economics of such potential factories would, in part, hinge on fast, accessible and inexpensive transportation to markets in the lowlands; such conditions are not possible without the new road.

Li (2005) has suggested that marginalized populations may be particularly interested in notions of state and state power and thus may work to develop strategies that allow for greater access to the core. I would argue that the focus on building a new road to the lowlands is an example of such strategizing. However, rather than simply attempting to position themselves closer to state-sponsored amenities, this is also a process of making themselves visible to the private sector. Certainly, villagers suggest that government teachers and doctors might be more likely to come to Thakkali Nadu if there were a more direct road. A greater concern, though, is the current lack of diverse economic opportunities in the area and the expectation that this will change if a new road allowed businesses and private individuals to enter the area.

At the same time, this road is not only conceived of in strictly financial terms or as a means to access private markets. If a new road were to be constructed, after so

many years, it would also symbolize government recognition of local development concerns; this, in turn, would mean that local voices were being considered in the decision-making processes that shape life in Thakkali Nadu. Villagers feel that the primary problem with road development is that for years they have been caught by political processes that they could not control. Specifically, the Tamil Nadu state All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) party, ruling the state from 1991-96 and 2001-6, was viewed as having little concern for tribal well-being. In 2006, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) party, leading the Democratic Progressive Alliance coalition of political parties, came to power in Tamil Nadu, and this, coupled with the 2004 national election of the Congress party, was viewed with optimism. The importance of national and state politics plays out with regards to the road because the state is responsible for approving and undertaking road works, but in the case of the proposed Thakkali Nadu road, the national government must give permission to construct the road through protected forest areas. The new political landscape is important, since villagers tend to consider the DMK and the Congress parties to be friendlier to Scheduled Tribe communities and those who were neglected by the AIADMK. This, in part, reflects the DMK's election manifesto (2006), which promised specific considerations and programs for Scheduled Tribes and also included a number of projects aimed at marginal farmers, the landless and rural inhabitants. These included promises to decrease the price of ration shop rice from Rs.3.5/kilogram to Rs.2/kilogram, a promise to supply a free colour television to poor households that did not already own one, and the announcement of a planned six month maternity allowance of Rs.1000/month for poor women. Moreover, farmers frequently described the DMK and Congress as having a good relationship, or a “nice link.” This is reflected by DMK support of the national Congress party during the 2004 elections and the inclusion of the state Congress party in the DMK's Democratic Progressive Alliance. This relationship, villagers said, has the potential to ease the various levels of permission and funding needed to finally get the road constructed. It is these political tensions that farmers identified as the central permission problem, not any concern with issues such as forest biodiversity and forest commercial value. Indeed, one young woman stated that the land through which the proposed road would be built is mostly covered by “small plants” and bush, not commercially viable sandalwood or other species.

At the same time, local actions were still seen as necessary to continue the momentum for the road. As one man in his mid-forties said, prior actions have made a dif-

ference, “now the government has changed, so now they are ready to put the road. They are making those plans. We are writing many letters and planning ... They show more interest in the road ... Before, the government did not show any interest.” Nevertheless, a woman in her mid-forties, speaking with regards to the women’s self-help group to which she belongs, stressed the importance of ongoing planning when she stated, “we have planned to fight the government for the road at any time if they call by the self-help groups’ committees. If after one to two years the road does not come, we will do some severe action for it...if we struggle, only then will the government listen.”

Conclusion

The struggle for a new road and the associations of development and inclusion that are attached to it, are examples of local action, priorities and experiences intersecting with currently salient questions of globalization, development and the roles of large-scale versus small-scale institutions. How do we account for communities that are actively attempting to become more embedded in larger processes when these larger processes may be problematic?

Recently, Attwood (2005) pointed out that small-scale and localized development foci may be seen as a panacea to the inefficiencies of large-scale national institutions and the forces of development globalization. That is, local action may be understood as both simpler and more efficient when it comes to development. And yet, this perspective must be balanced by the recognition that large-scale institutions, whether they be economic, infrastructural or otherwise, are now central to many aspects of day-to-day survival (Attwood 2005). This recognition raises questions of how to integrate small-scale, locally efficient practices in large-scale, national development contexts. Agrawal (2005), in his analysis of forestry management in Kumaon, North India, has demonstrated how people may be drawn into government projects and policies even when those projects do not reflect local priorities. As local people reluctantly become involved, they may subsequently reshape government institutions. Through this reshaping of state programs, villagers and grassroots actors articulate certain visions of active citizenship and their place in the nation.

A similar argument can be made regarding Thakkali Nadu, although in this case, villagers are actively attempting to position themselves within state networks, not simply coping with being absorbed. This makes an important point about local perceptions of advantageous social positioning. Thakkali Nadu villagers want to be drawn

out of their geographically and conceptually peripheral location. They are not resisting resource management initiatives or encroachment by large-scale institutions and external forces. Rather, they are actively inviting certain kinds of so-called encroachments, attempting to make them viable through improving state-sponsored transportation infrastructure.

It might be tempting to argue that political agitation for a more direct road to the lowlands is actually poorly thought through, as it would further situate Thakkali Nadu in an economic context that is systematically disadvantageous. That is, it may continue a current district-wide trend toward monocropping and deforestation (Finnis 2006), which in turn has longer-term implications for local economic stability. Moreover, it might contribute to land encroachment from lowland populations, even though some farmers argue that this will not be the case. While these are valid concerns, these outcomes do not have to be inevitable. Monocultures, deforestation and encroachment possibilities could be mitigated in part by integrating road construction and increased district accessibility with programs that allow small-scale farmers to take advantage of the economic and environmental benefits of mixed cropping. Such programs do exist in other parts of the Hills, including an ongoing minor millet project aimed at increasing agricultural biodiversity, conserving millet landraces and creating a viable market for millets (Gruere et al. 2009; King et al. 2008).

Further market integration certainly has implications both for short- and long-term food (Bohle 1992) and biodiversity problems (Kumaran et al. 1998). Nevertheless, these emerging problems (Finnis 2006, 2007) do not diminish the importance of this road for local people. The struggle for the road is about consciously becoming more embedded in larger public structures and private market institutions. In Thakkali Nadu, farmers are fully aware of the importance that the structures of the market play in India.

While the celebration of cultural and practical difference might be used in some contexts to counteract large-scale, globalizing structures (Bond et al. 2003), villagers display little interest in attempting to differentiate themselves from lowlanders in economic and livelihood terms. Moreover, a cost-benefit tension regarding the proposed road highlights a way in which large-scale institutions can be both inefficient *and* essential for livelihoods (see Attwood 2005). The current road into Thakkali Nadu can certainly be viewed this way. On the one hand, the old road allows for tapioca cultivation, an important economic practice that has allowed household electricity and other benefits to enter the district. On the other, it is an ineffi-

cient means of transportation, both for harvest yields and for people who wish to access goods and services. In undertaking a struggle for a more direct road, Thakkali Nadu inhabitants are attempting to reduce such inefficiency (see Attwood 2005) even as they further embed their households and their communities in the market economy. This example of grassroots action merges the power of small-scale, local institutions with globalizing trends, demonstrating how development depends both on local attention to social problems and on connecting more efficiently with large-scale public and private institutions like roads and markets. In making these connections, villagers are articulating demands for the recognition that they are active subjects with voices that need to be heard. In particular, they are claiming equal access to crucial public spaces that allow for market integration. A road is the first step to being able to access hospitals and educational facilities. Perhaps more importantly at this point in time, the road also signifies equal access to the private, capitalist spaces that make up the national market economy.

Experiences of inclusion and exclusion can be demonstrated through a number of possible practices (Gupta 1995), services and spaces. In the case of Thakkali Nadu, roads both literally and symbolically connect farmers both to other large-scale public and private institutions and to other people. A lack of efficient transportation in Thakkali Nadu is thus perceived as more than simply limiting physical accessibility. It also signifies individual, community and group economic and social marginalization, reinforcing a minority identity that stands in contrast to the ways in which lowlanders are constructed. The Thakkali Nadu struggle for transportation infrastructure development emerges from a pervasive sense of being left out, coupled with specific visions of the future, both in terms of household economic security and in terms of the images villagers have for the future of their communities. No community presents a universally accepted, uncontested vision of future aspirations and goals; in Thakkali Nadu, there is some dissent about what the road will do for people and how it might change the sense of personal security and safety that villagers currently experience. Nevertheless, a new road is almost always discussed in positive development, economic and social terms. The completion of this road is part of a local vision of district development, a vision that highlights the importance of consumer practices in notions of inclusion and the meaning of development. Consumption, through better access to the market economy, is a key aspect of villagers' perceptions of what it means to be "developed," a category that they assign to lowlanders who are constructed as having state and private resources at their fingertips.

By undertaking a movement to build this road, small farmers in Thakkali Nadu are pushing the boundaries of the Scheduled Tribe status, a status that positions them as subjects in need of protective discrimination. While there is no explicit rejection of the Scheduled Tribe status (and indeed, there would be little advantage in that), villagers are also positioning themselves as citizens who are active in forming the economic and social shape of the nation.

Villagers are also articulating their ideas of what development means. Turner (1995) has noted that one of the continuing sites of conflict in development discourse and practices is the frequent disjuncture between community aspirations and government priorities. In Thakkali Nadu, this disjuncture plays a key role in community mobilization, thus demonstrating that government-sponsored development does not necessarily correspond to small farmers' visions and hopes for prosperity in the future. Villagers are well aware that they would have easier access to markers of development and inclusion if they left the Hills. Some families have done so; others periodically migrate between the lowlands and the Hills to take advantages of different opportunities. However, still others do not wish to shift localities in order to access all the perceived opportunities of the lowlands; they do not want to move into cities to become developed. Ultimately, they wish for lowland transportation infrastructure, goods, services and economic options to come to them. This is about reshaping communities and furthering specific, local images of villages that are more viable for the future. As one woman said, somewhat wistfully, "if the road comes, we will be like the plains people only, not like hill people."

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Notes

- 1 The name of this district is a pseudonym.
- 2 A large body of literature addresses issues of marginalization and citizenship in non-Indian contexts. Recent work includes considerations of policy (Kohl 2003; Mariner 2003), language and cultural politics (Linke 2004), the shaping of “responsible” citizens through non-government organizations (Ilean and Basok 2004), refugee camps and gender (Bartolomei et al. 2003), race and national imagery (Neal 2002), the middle-class and social imaginary (Guano 2004), clandestinity (Coutin 1999), civic institutions and health care (Horton 2004), routine civic and everyday duties (Sykes 2001), and development and indigeneity (Belausteguigoitia 2004). Moreover, the themes of state surveillance and protectionist attitudes that minimize the recognition of broadly-defined indigenous agency are not limited to India, either in contemporary or historical contexts (Alfred and Corn-tassel 2005; Cairns 2003; Huayhua 1999; Phelps 1985; Mackey 2005; Mercer 2003; Miller 2000; Ramos 2003; Short 2003; Siddle 2003; Wilson 2004).
- 3 A private teacher was hired and is paid through an arrangement that each child attending the school contributes Rs.25/month towards the salary. This amount is less than the daily wage earned by a woman undertaking paid labour in another’s field.
- 4 This is a highly idealized view of the reality of life in the lowland areas surrounding the Kolli Hills.
- 5 Nighties are ankle-length, cotton dresses popular in lowland areas for wearing around the house. They allow for ease of movement when doing chores. I first noticed nighties being regularly and widely worn, both around the house and for field labour, in 2006. Prior to this, nighties were rare; seeing women wear them on a daily basis was an immediately noticeable change when I arrived in 2006.
- 6 At the time, the Kolli Hills belonged to the district of Salem. However, the boundaries have since been redrawn, and the Kolli Hills now belongs to Namakkal District, which also includes Namakkal, the largest lowland town in the district. Actions undertaken in the 1970s may not necessarily have contributed to the decision to extend the current road to Thakkali Nadu district. The timing is questionable, since the current road was not extended until the late 1980s.
- 7 Informal discussions that I have had with villagers living in other parts of the Kolli Hills suggest that these perceptions of lowland versus Hill lifeways were not limited to Thakkali Nadu alone.
- 8 Cassava fields dominate the area and households that continue to own some uncultivated land often have plans to clear the land for crop cultivation. This expansion is explained in terms of the soil “losing strength” after too many years of cultivation. Some villagers are concerned about deforestation. Farmers associate their dependence on this crop to district isolation and articulations for a new road.
- 9 English reading and speaking skills are understood as important to getting a good job later in life. Villagers in Thakkali Nadu do not feel that teaching English as a separate class (as is done in Tamil-language schools) will make their children fluent. Similar perspectives have been found elsewhere in India (see La Dousa 2005).

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