

# Environmental cosmopolitanism in a South Indian village

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## Abstract

Much of anthropological literature on social impacts of globalization focuses on urban centers, with rural sites oft-represented as passive hinterlands. This article shifts analytical focus to a rural site: Kumily in Kerala, India. Kumily's proximity to a wildlife sanctuary involves many of its residents with the local nature-tourism industry and with environmental stewardship through a set of eco-development activities. I argue it is through such engagements that these residents adopt a cosmopolitan identity and develop a sense of environmental citizenship. This article views Kumily as an important global node where multiple notions of environmentalism and development converge. By specifically focusing on the environmental subjecthoods of indigenous youths who work as professional ecotourism guides, the article privileges the cosmopolitanism of the poor as a focal point of understanding social change in India.

## Keywords

Environmental cosmopolitanism, biodiversity conservation, ecotourism, India

## Introduction

During one afternoon in August 2007 my friend Gracy, a veterinary laboratory assistant in her mid-thirties, told me that “culture has come to Kumily.” Gracy was referring to the remarkable change that her village, Kumily, had gone through in a very short period of time. For a long time, Kumily was a small village at the edge of the Periyar Tiger Reserve wildlife sanctuary, or PTR, in the South Indian state of Kerala (see Figure 1). While a part of what is now PTR was designated as a protected area as early as in 1899, its official boundaries with the village were porous until recently. Gracy, like many others in Kumily, told me that less than two decades ago the village itself was heavily forested. This made the village an

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easy refuge for “anti-social” goons and a “dangerous place” for young women. By 2007, all this had changed drastically. The main one-mile long road of the village was thronged with restaurants, tour-guides’ offices, and souvenir shops, marking the meteoric rise of the village as a busy tourist destination since the mid-1990s. The already-mixed Hindu, Christian, and Muslim population of Kumily was further diversified with people from all over Kerala and other Indian states taking up residence to work in the expanding tourism industry. The sudden influx of tourists stemmed from numerous factors, including the neoliberalization of the Indian economy contributing to the rise of the Indian new middle class (Fernandes, 2006), the Kerala government’s active tourism campaign, and the introduction of several community-based ecotourism programs in the PTR as part of the India Eco-Development Project (IEDP) since 1997.

This article highlights Kumily as a dynamic rural site to understand social change in contemporary India, thereby shifting the focus of recent anthropological studies of neoliberalism and globalization to village India, rather than on the metropolises of Delhi, Mumbai, or Bangalore (e.g., Dittrich, 2007; Dupont, 2011; Patel, 2004; Shaw and Satish, 2007). The article notes the emergence of Kumily as a global node (Tsing, 2005) where international economic policies of structural adjustments and democratization of environmental governance policies converge with grassroots level development aspirations and human–environment relationships. It also contributes to the burgeoning literature on the significant role that the Indian state continues to play in the lives of rural poor even in the context of economic liberalization of India (Gupta and Sivaramakrishnan, 2011). The lives of Kumily residents have changed drastically in recent decades due to a greater involvement of the PTR Forest Department in the fabric of the day-to-day life in the village. Biodiversity conservation in India follows what is often called the “fortress model” of conservation that prohibits most kinds of human activities within ecologically important habitats. The core area of the PTR is a national park, and it is one of 27 sites for the prestigious Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF)-initiated “Project Tiger” in India. Despite its protected status, many villagers told me about their childhood days when they could easily go into the forest to relax. I was also told stories of humiliation at the hands of forest guards when the village women were caught collecting fire wood for their subsistence needs more recently that resonated with similar accounts of forest department-local community conflicts from all over India (Jefferey et al., 2003). Things changed in 1996 when PTR was selected as one of the seven wildlife sanctuaries for the IEDP.

IEDP was implemented in PTR in 1997, based on a site-specific micro-plan designed by a group of local social scientists. Funded by the World Bank, the Global Environment Facility, and the Government of India, IEDP was to reduce negative impacts of protected area on the lives of forest-adjacent communities by providing the latter with livelihood opportunities. This, in turn, was expected to make local people less dependent on forests and engender grassroots support for biodiversity conservation efforts. Despite its similarity with many other initiatives introduced all over the world (Vaccaro et al., 2013; West, 2006), the IEDP at PTR

was shaped by specific local social dynamics. The PTR Forest Department prioritized the economic needs of some of the poorest villages, specifically focusing on two indigenous communities: the *Mannans* and the *Paliyans*. PTR turned out to be the only “success story” of the IEDP (Kothari and Pathak, 2004) as it generated sustained employment opportunities and community development initiatives that continue to function under the umbrella of a “government organized non-governmental organization” or GONGO called the Periyar Foundation that was formed in 2004.<sup>1</sup> Kumily’s situatedness within Kerala, a state with a history of grassroots political participation (Thomas and Franke, 2002) played a significant role in shaping this “success,” as did the agencies of engaged forest officials, proactive villagers, and the rise of a global ethic of democratization in international environmental circles (Tsing, 2005). PTR was also acknowledged as a “conservation model” by a Government of India appointed committee for evaluating the state of tiger conservation in India in 2005 (Narain et al., 2005). PTR won the UNESCO-Government of India environmental governance award in 2012, and it continues to play an important role in biodiversity conservation discourse in India.

I first met Gracy in June 2007 just outside the PTR entrance. Gracy was on her way to the small veterinary laboratory inside the forest where she worked as an assistant. She was a treasurer of village neighborhood-based eco-development committees, or EDCs. EDCs were formed as part of the IEDP to enable poor villagers participate in various employment-generating initiatives, such as training workshops for making handicrafts in Kumily. Neighborhood EDCs ran women’s micro-credit groups and conducted children’s nature clubs. Like several women from her neighborhood, Gracy was also a member of the women’s voluntary forest patrol group called the *Vasanthasenas*. What started as a group of 10 village women during the initial days of the IEDP has now become a Kumily institution with almost hundred women and a national award for its environmental stewardship. By the end of 2007 Gracy and her family had started a small souvenir shop for tourists selling locally grown spices, thus joining many Kumily natives in investing in the growing tourism industry while holding a regular job. My time with Gracy enabled me to understand the myriad ways in which the current interventions of the Forest Department/Periyar Foundation have penetrated the lifeworld of the poor villagers. Her witty commentaries helped me to understand how villagers like her navigated through these initiatives in manners that best benefitted them.

The relationship between the Forest Department and the local community is even more involved for villagers who work as official ecotourism guides. At the inception of the IEDP the PTR authorities specifically chose to work with the youths from the indigenous Mannan and the Paliyan communities in Kumily. Several of these youths were trained to become professional guides for newly developed ecotourism hikes in the forest. Ten years later, these indigenous eco-guides were some of the veteran workers in PTR who cooperated with the Forest Department in contributing to biodiversity conservation through nature interpretation, daily monitoring of the forest biota, and training new eco-guides.<sup>2</sup>

These are the same villagers who also meet visiting biodiversity professionals from around the country and beyond as local ecological experts who exemplify the “success” of the “Periyar model of conservation.” The Forest Department also helped farmers from these communities by paying off their outstanding agricultural loans at the beginning of IEDP, and continues to facilitate the sale of organic pepper grown by Mannan farmers in international markets. The relatively privileged access to the tiger reserve and other village development initiatives that Mannans and Paliyans enjoy at PTR is both reminiscent of traditional patron–client relationship common in rural India on the one hand, and the common phenomenon of privileging perceived indigeneity in the context of participatory biodiversity conservation initiatives around the world (Rupp, 2008) on the other. PTR still promotes the “fortress model of conservation” and all major decision-making power regarding the forest rests with the Forest Department. And yet, a closer look at the lifeworld of these many villagers who are engaged in the embodied work of biodiversity conservation enables us to understand the ways in which these villagers perceive themselves as valuable environmental actors engaged in the protection of the PTR.



**Figure 1.** This photograph taken from the top of the Kurushumala hill in Kumily shows the relative locations of the village (on the left) and the Periyar Tiger Reserve (on the right)  
Source: T Chaudhuri.

This article provides an ethnographic account of environmental subjecthoods of some of the villagers in Kumily whose daily lives are shaped by the recent rise in prominence of PTR in the “biodiversity global network” (Escobar, 1998) and tourist imaginations. The data mostly comes from village-based ethnographic research conducted during a seven-month period in Kumily during 2007. Additionally, it is informed by interviews and archival research conducted in the Indian national capital of Delhi and the Kerala state capital of Thiruvanthapuram during the summers of 2005–2007. Such juxtaposition of classic village ethnography with multi-sited research acknowledges the continuing role of villages as unique loci of flows of identities and resources in a fast-changing world (Gallo, 2015; Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan, 2003; Mines and Yazgi, 2010; Shneiderman, 2015).

Rather than viewing the villagers in Kumily as passive recipients of social changes emanating from elsewhere, a focus on the self-perceptions of the villagers as environmental actors brings us into conversation with Sivamarakrishnan and Agrawal’s (2003) concept of “regional modernity.” This notion of regional modernity that emphasizes place-based histories and multiple variations on the theme of modernity allows us to privilege village India as a site for analyzing social change in post-liberalization India. Furthermore, Gracy’s comment about “culture” arriving in Kumily portrays a sense of “arrival” that goes beyond mere economic survival in a busy tourism hub. By adeptly navigating through multiple perspectives of human–environment relationships, many Kumily residents have become ecologically *cosmopolitan* (Saiz, 2008), while strongly maintaining their place-based attitudes towards their local forest. This article will elaborate on the themes of environmentalism (Agrawal, 2005) and subaltern cosmopolitanism (Gidwani, 2006) by focusing specifically on the eco-guides who juxtapose their place-based identities with their professional identities as nature interpreters at PTR.

## **The village as a global node**

Over the last two decades, Kumily has entered in the network of global destinations for wildlife enthusiasts. For Kumily residents there is a strong perception that it is only in the recent years that they have arrived in the world. A closer examination of the environmental history of Kumily, however, reveals that the forests around Kumily had been part of global flows of capital and discourses for more than a century. The region gained prominence for the colonial administration during the early 19th century with the setting up of tea plantations (Lovatt and De Jong, 1993 [1972]). Kumily became important when the Mullaperiyar dam was built in 1895 to provide water for irrigation to the surrounding valley. The Periyar Lake, resulting from the inundation of 26 square kilometers of forest, is the most popular tourist attraction today. Modern-day conservation efforts in the forests around the lake were initiated by the tea plantation owners, despite their own roles in deforestation in the area. The planters founded a “gentleman hunters” club called the Peermade Game Association in 1935. By contrast, hunting with snares by local people was

depicted as cruel. As evidenced in their meticulously kept meeting minutes, changes in the discourses of the Association paralleled a global shift in discourse around the role of hunting and wildlife preservation. Over the years, the Association introduced an increasing number of restrictions on hunting, citing examples of similar efforts in other British colonies. The influence of the club, rechristened as the Peermade Wildlife Society WHEN? IF you know the date, enter it here, started to decline when the Periyar Wildlife Sanctuary came under the purview of the national government after Indian independence. Periyar Sanctuary became the 27th tiger sanctuary in the country in 1978 through the Project Tiger program sponsored by the World Wildlife Fund (now the WWF). By adopting the national animal of India, Project Tiger is intrinsic to what Cederlöf and Sivaramakrishnan (2006) call “ecological nationalism.”

Until the mid-1980s, tourists were few and tourism was not a major economic activity in Kerala, where agricultural production was the primary industry. Kumily is the center of the *Panchayat*, or regional administrative unit. It houses a government hospital, a technical college, and a college for training teachers, along with other government institutions. A private tour-guide, with a flair for story-telling, told me that he would occasionally accompany “hippies” inside the PTR, undetected by forest guards, and lead the latter in “forest adventures.” Things started changing drastically in the 1990s due to two major developments. During this time India went through a period of economic structural adjustment, and tourism received a major boost from the state. Kerala, with its popular slogan “God’s Own Country,” became one of the fastest growing tourism destinations in India. The second factor was the introduction of the IEDP in 1997 in PTR that restructured the villagers’ relationship with the forest. When the IEDP formally ended, the Periyar Foundation was formed in 2004 to carry on with eco-development activities.

In 2005, a Forests Rights Bill (henceforth the Bill) was proposed in the Indian Parliament that prescribed the granting of land rights to the indigenous or the tribal (a term more commonly used in India)<sup>3</sup> peoples already living inside protected forests. The Bill became highly controversial because many biodiversity professionals argued that granting land rights in forests would sound the death knell to tiger conservation in India. Various tribal rights activists, on the other hand, argued that biodiversity conservation in India could actually benefit from empowering local peoples who already lived within ecological habitats. The Bill eventually became the Forest Rights Act in 2006. The Act did not directly impact life in Kumily as Mannans and Paliyans were no longer living inside the PTR at that time, but it framed the broader context in which the “success” of PTR was evaluated. PTR was recognized as a “conservation model” by the Tiger Task Force, a committee commissioned by the Government of India to evaluate the state of tiger conservation in India (Narain et al., 2005). In Kumily I met several eco-guides who had won and/or went on to win national awards for their environmental stewardships. I saw how these awards shaped the self-perceptions of these villagers as environmental actors. I also came to meet the main organizer

of one of these awards who argued vehemently why the Act was disastrous for Indian environmental conservation. Another staunch critic of the Act, an editor for a conservation-themed magazine, had also visited PTR to select two young Mannan eco-guides for a prestigious “green award” during my stay there in 2007. PTR, thus, seemed to provide a common ground for both conservationists and peoples’ rights activists.

Debates over the Forest Rights Act demonstrate how the forest as a social space is a product of multiple socio-economic and environmental factors that interact with each other to shape the lifeworld of Kumily residents. Villagers are both impacted by and also manipulate these forces of social change to best suit their own needs. People in places like Kumily are enmeshed (Ingold, 2008) within a web of events and actors where each point in this intricate and multidirectional web influences what happens everywhere. Thus, international globetrotters visit places like the PTR forest with their own perceptions of “wilderness” that might contrast with local perceptions of the human–environment relationship. At the same time, it is through these tourists’ interactions with the forest and people in Kumily that their own identities as nature-enthusiasts are formed. While people in Kumily do not have the power to formulate international environmental policies such as IEDP, it is the site-specific interpretations of these policies that determine their future applicability worldwide. This understanding helps us unravel the notion of environmental cosmopolitanism in specific locales of human–environmental interactions.

### **Eco-tourism work and environmental subjecthood**

Most of Kumily residents cannot afford to travel much beyond their own village. A proposed educational trip in August 2007 to several well-known wildlife sanctuaries in Kerala was a much-anticipated event for the members of the Tribal Tracker’s eco-development committee (TT EDC) that was comprised of 23 indigenous young men. The four-day long trip to five wildlife sanctuaries included members of the TT EDC, the Periyar Foundation Education Officer, another PTR representative, and myself. The days involved meetings with people ranging from forest officials to newly trained eco-guides from local villages, hiking inside various sanctuaries, and visiting various nature-interpretation centers. Many of these wildlife sanctuaries were starting out their own eco-tourism programs and hiring members of local indigenous communities, and they wanted to hear from the veterans of the PTR. In Eravikulam National Park, a couple of the Tribal Trackers from Kumily practically interrogated the few local community members who were summoned to meet us. The latter were repeatedly asked whether they thought they had the tenacity to remain faithful to the eco-development program at their sanctuary, through thick and thin.

At Chinnar Sanctuary, the Tribal Trackers criticized the existence of different colored uniforms for members of different programs introduced by the sanctuary administration. After all, they argued, wearing the same uniform gives a sense of

unity, a sense of *shakti* or power to the people who are all committed to the same cause of saving a forest. The PTR eco-guides further pointed out that the reason that eco-development was successful at their sanctuary was due to the initial investment in building up “mother” EDCs at the tribal hamlets, and training the tribal youths as professional eco-guides only after the tribal communities and the Forest Department authorities had a trusting relationship with each other. The eco-guides from Kumily clearly chose to represent themselves as expert professionals from the “success model” that was the PTR. It was also evident that despite significant differences in economic statuses between the indigenous eco-guides and the Forest Department/Periyar Foundation officials, they viewed themselves as representatives of the same entity of the “Periyar Family” – a term often used in public meetings by PTR officials.

Our experience at the Parambikulam Wild Life Sanctuary was significantly different as this sanctuary already had a more well-planned ecotourism program. On our first day we were invited to a pre-breakfast hike in the forest. We were guided by a local forest guard who started pointing out some of the forest flora. Soon several members of the TT EDC started jovially showing off their ecological knowledge by asking each other and our guide for the scientific names of these plants. I have come across many instances when such knowledge of Latin names of forest flora is actively used by both the eco-guides and the post-colonial scientists (Lowe, 2006) of the Periyar Foundation to demonstrate a special, or even a “modern,” perspective on the PTR. My participation in a week-long training program for a new group of eco-guides enabled me to study the ways in which Latin botanical names, as well as the reiteration of the fact that some of these species are “*apurvamaya*” (unique) and “*lokatile ivere matra undu*” (it is found only here in the world, i.e. endemic), are used to create professional subject identities of the new initiates (Chaudhuri, 2013). In another instance, during a field-training session, a trainee bent down to pick up a mushroom. While it was common for villagers during walks in the forest to collect wild fruits and other edibles, this trainee was immediately reminded by the accompanying biologist that one simply doesn’t stop to collect edibles while accompanying tourists. To become a professional eco-guide is thus to re-orient one’s relationship with the familiar forest both at the cognitive and at the behavioral level.

The daily act of walking in the forest with tourists for most eco-guides often does not involve conversations about biodiversity. Most tourists are interested in just viewing charismatic mega-fauna. It was not surprising, then, that some of the veteran eco-guides would tell me how they want the “*talperiullah*” or the “interested” tourist, someone who is happy to walk in the forest, rather than constantly demanding wildlife viewings. Some eco-guides even saw their interactions with the “interested” tourists as learning opportunities. In one instance, I saw one of the veteran eco-guides consult a bird-watchers’ guide book with an amateur bird-watcher from Germany when none of them could identify the bird they had just seen in the forest. I have also witnessed many times when, after a hike in the forest, some of the eco-guides of the TT group would consult a copy of the

book, *Birds of India*, by a famous Indian ornithologist – Dr Salim Ali – to identify specific birds. Many indigenous eco-guides were careful to juxtapose their “scientific” knowledge about biodiversity with their place-based traditional environmental knowledge. While pointing out to a *Peepal* tree in the forest during one of the guided hikes, for example, an eco-guide explained the importance of the tree according to Mannan religious beliefs. Referring to the scientific name of the tree – *Ficus religiosa* – he concluded that even “science tells us that.”

Walking in the forest is an inherently physical experience, and my own changing level of comfort with the ubiquitous leeches enabled me to understand the very visceral nature of human–environment interactions in PTR. Many tourists were extremely uncomfortable, even almost hysterical in one case, when they encountered leeches during their hikes. By comparison, the nonchalant attitude of a veteran eco-guide of the Tiger Trail ecotourism program who wore a pair of flip-flops during a two-day hike, while the rest of us wore our leech-protection “socks,” exemplified a certain intimate relationship with the forest. The Tiger Trail ecotourism program is comprised of ex-poachers cum tour guides who used to illegally collect cinnamon bark from the forest prior to the IEDP. Their transformation from being poachers to eco-guides has often been described in a moralistic language of “reformation” by PTR officials and journalists alike (Basheer, 2003; Radhakrishnan, 2001). My walk in the forest with the ex-poachers as part of the two-day Tiger Trail tour, however, enabled me to understand the continuity between the experience of walking the forest as eco-guides and as poachers, even though the official narrative highlighted the absolute moral disjunction between these two kinds of work (see Figure 2).

During their conversations with peer community members from other sanctuaries, the Tribal Trackers identified themselves with the different personnel of the PTR group through the symbolism of the same green uniform. Such expressions of identification and vertical solidarity flies in the face of assumed lateral identification of indigenous peoples with each other in the context of debates regarding the Forest Rights Act. This is not to say that the indigenous eco-guides in Kumily were unaware of *adivasi* or indigenous rights discourses in India. In fact, many of the indigenous eco-guides zealously guarded their privileged access to the PTR, an access that was begrudged by many private tour guides in Kumily. During an international biodiversity conservation workshop at PTR a Mannan eco-guide said that only the “tribals” should be allowed to go in the forest [as eco-guides], otherwise “all will be lost.” Such observations provide a nuanced picture of an environmental subjecthood that is invested in perpetuating the “fortress model of conservation” whereby only *some* community members should be allowed access to valuable ecological habitats. Forest Department officials, on their part, emphasized the notion in many public events that the “tribals” have a “unique” connection to the forest. During the plenary session of that same workshop the PTR Deputy Director referred to the members of the TT EDC as “our tribal scientists” who had discovered a new species of butterfly in the forest. It was evident, however, that only those eco-guides who were articulate in their support for the biodiversity conservation project at PTR were viewed as “more



**Figure 2.** A member of the Tiger Trail eco-tourism committee is tracking wild elephants for us during our two days-long hiking tour in the PTR.

Source: T Chaudhuri.

knowledgeable” by both the eco-guides themselves and by the Forest Department/Foundation personnel. It was these “knowledgeable” eco-guides who were showcased as ideal community-based environmental stewards to visiting ecological professionals, journalists, and students.

While it is true to that some villages have more knowledge about the forest biota than others, knowledgeability here is also a way of measuring the environmentality of the villagers. The concept of environmentality, as developed by Agrawal (2005), borrows from the Foucauldian notion of governmentality in analyzing the ways in which members of grassroots communities come to internalize diktats of environmental protectionism and self-regulate their interactions with protected forests. While Agrawal noted the dramatic shift in the attitudes of North Indian villagers over a period of a decade of managing a protected forest, Kumily residents never had similar kind of managerial right over PTR. The environmentality of the Kumily residents, and particularly that of the eco-guides, resulted from their engaged interactions with nature enthusiasts and environmental experts visiting the PTR. It is this theme of engagement that I turn to next.

### **Environmental cosmopolitanism of conservation work**

Biodiversity conservation which aims at saving globally important ecological habitats is a cosmopolitan project that is often controlled by big environmental NGOs

or ENGOs (Heatherington, 2010). West (2006) traces the international networks of influence that molds grassroots human–environmental relationships in Papua New Guinea in accordance to a neoliberalizing conservation worldview (Vaccaro et al., 2013). In India, while preservation of local ecological habitats has a long history ranging from sacred groves to colonial preservation clubs, it is the post-colonial engagement with international discourses on biodiversity that is relevant here. Project Tiger contributed to the nation-building project in protecting the “national animal.” As compared to many other developing nations, biodiversity conservation in India exercises a strong sovereignty model (Escobar, 1998) of environmental governance whereby the post-colonial nation-state exercises significant amount of control. At the same time, “Project Tiger” was formed in response to a global crisis in wild tiger conservation. The IEDP itself was mainly sponsored by the World Bank, an organization that played significant role in shaping economic structural adjustment policies and neoliberalization of biodiversity conservation in places like India.

Biodiversity conservation often focuses on key charismatic non-human species, even in the context of biosphere reserves that acknowledges human–animal co-habitations. Barua (2013), in his analysis of the conservation of the Asian Elephant in Kaziranga National Park in India, notes that these more-than-human actors become cosmopolitan subjects who mobilize ideas, funds, and expert personnel from different parts of the world to shape environmental policies at specific locales. Describing the public discourse surrounding the London Elephant Parade of 2010, whereby 250 stylized elephant statues were placed all over the city to raise awareness about wild elephant conservation, Barua noted that much of the discourse focused on the elephants as charismatic icons and the artistic styles of the statues, and not on real-life socio-political contexts in which the elephant habitats are situated. Thus, the Elephant Parade told us more about the cultures of the global audience, than those of peoples who live next to wildlife habitats. It is this kind of marginalization of *local* communities who share the habitats of these more-than-human *cosmopolitan* actors that often leads to violence against local peoples. Jalais (2011) writes about the shooting of a group of Bangladeshi refugees who had settled in the Sunderbans Biosphere Reserve by the West Bengal government in India in the 1980s. In rural Sardinia in Italy a proposal to create a new national park was intricately linked to the Italian nation-building project on the eve of its merger with the European Union. Rural Sardinians were marginalized through the invocation of the myth of Sardinia and Sardinians as “dangerous” and in need of the modernization effects of environmental governance (Heatherington, 2010).

The tigers in PTR are of concern to both national and international conservation bodies. The 2005 discourse of “national shame” in the context of the total annihilation of tigers due to poaching from the Sariska Tiger Reserve in western India highlighted the importance of tiger statistics in the nation-building project (Mazoomdar, 2005). When I spoke with Kumily residents from all walks of life, almost everybody unequivocally told me that they supported the Forest

Department in its effort to conserve PTR. Even if such verbal support was a result of the local communities' dependence on the Forest Department for real or perceived economic benefits, such lip service still stood out in the context of community resistances to fenced-in conservation areas around the world. Some villagers were at the very center of the cosmopolitan project of conservation in their capacity as eco-guides, forest patrollers, and other roles. Their identification with the biodiversity conservation project was evident in their ongoing efforts to share and augment their professional skills as experts on their local biota.

The concept of environmental cosmopolitanism proposed here is based on the idea of green cosmopolitanism developed by Saiz (2008). Saiz's notion of green cosmopolitanism highlights a sense of global environmental responsibility as part of one's identity as an environmental subject. In other words, one's actions and attitudes towards the environment are shaped by one's identity as a global citizen. Kumily residents who are actively engaged in the project of biodiversity conservation are often aware of their role as protectors of a globally important ecological habitat. Much of such self-perception of environmental subjecthood is consciously shaped by environmental educational events organized by the Forest Department/Periyar Foundation. During a week-long training session in August 2007 for six Kumily residents for a newly launched eco-tourism program, a Periyar Foundation biologist talked about the various species that are found *ivere matram* or "only here" in the world. Many of these species were "*apurvamayo*" or unique to the region of the Western Ghats, and hence part of the global ecological heritage (Chaudhuri, 2012). In another case, the PTR forest department organized a multi-day environmental event in July 2005 that included lecture sessions and team-building exercises. One of the keynote speakers of the event emphasized that PTR is specifically important for regulating rainfall and supporting agriculture in Kerala. At the same time, these functions are important on a global scale in the context of the threat of climate change. Ongoing environmental educational events like these enforced the notion that protecting PTR is a service that is important both at the national and the global level.

The cosmopolitan self-identity of the PTR eco-guides also stems from their involvement with the nature-based recreation industry. The experiences of the eco-guides living in Kumily parallel those of the tourist guides working in the Chandni Chowk bazaar in Delhi, where multiple cultural trajectories converge in the space of the bazaar (Favero, 2003). The tourist guides in the Chandni Chowk, who themselves remain rooted in one place, perceive themselves as being worldly-wise through their playful interactions with visitors from around the globe. Both in the case of Delhi and Kumily, it is through the fleeting but recurrent liaisons with tourists that the tour guides come to imagine themselves as cosmopolitan actors who can transcend their familiar surroundings, albeit temporarily. The members of the Tiger Trail ecotourism EDC showed me photographs of a "friend" from Mumbai who visits PTR almost every year. A young Mannan eco-guide asked me to help her email a "friend" from Sweden who had once visited PTR. Kumily residents also exhibited their ways of being worldly-wise by showing off

their knowledge of popular phrases in several European languages, and their casual references to their acknowledgement of differing social norms around the world. For others, the exchange of ecological knowledge carried out through conversations during hikes with bird watchers and wildlife photographers in PTR contributed to their sense of environmental cosmopolitanism.

Such a notion of cosmopolitanism – or interactions with multiple worldviews – reminds us of Gidwani's (2006) arguments about the cosmopolitanism of the subaltern. Subaltern cosmopolitanism is often an economic necessity that requires the subaltern/poor to be adept at switching between multiple worldviews. Subaltern cosmopolitanism is also about the emergence of feelings of solidarity across national boundaries through comparable life experiences. Thus, if indigenous eco-guides shared a common sense of environmental citizenship with other biodiversity professionals at PTR, it was through their work as tourism service providers that they find a common ground with other villagers who are involved in the tourism industry in various capacities. And while this article has only focused on eco-guides, it is worth mentioning that many other villagers – homestay owners, conservation-themed shop keepers, self-taught wildlife interpreters – also perceive their roles as global environmental citizens through their encounters with nature-based recreation industry in Kumily.

### **Conclusion: Village as a locus of social change and local agency**

In this article, I have demonstrated how neoliberal policies can be manipulated by grassroots actors to suit grassroots-level needs. The Kumily experience shows us the simultaneous thriving of private entrepreneurship and the replication of a traditional patron–client relationship between the Forest Department and the local community. It is precisely due to the replication of this patron–client relationship that Kumily residents can appeal to the state to provide them with privileged access to the forest by the dint of either their claim to indigeneity, or long term residency. Following Ong (2006), it is evident that neoliberalism does bring its own set of exceptions in the shape of suspension of labor rights, or even the suspension of some of the laws of the host nations. However, this article illustrates that there are also exceptions *to* neoliberal developments, if community rights and neighborhood-based interactions are harnessed properly.

The case of eco-guides in Kumily challenges us to rethink the concept of cosmopolitanism. By privileging the rural poor who are rooted in a place, rather than the tourists, cosmopolitanism shifts from an emphasis on consumption (and travel as consumption) to one's orientation towards the world as the key to cosmopolitan imagination. By designating the subaltern as the cosmopolitan (Gidwani, 2006), cosmopolitanism can be understood as a state of awareness of what it means to live in an (ecologically) interconnected world. We must also go beyond the environmental ethos of “think globally, act locally.” The Periyar forest is not just a local manifestation of global ecology, but rather a geographically embedded habitat with

regionally endemic biota. And while it is with the invention of global ecology (Lewis, 2004) that the biota in PTR had been enmeshed in a global network of environmental discourses, Kumily residents draw upon international discourses on biodiversity conservation *and* place-based ecological knowledge to form their identities as environmental subjects. Following Escobar (1998), environmentalism at PTR portrays a case where the globalocentric discourse of biodiversity conservation can be in (albeit unequal) conversation with the sovereignty model of the post-colonial forest department and the cultural autonomy model of place-based environmental sensibilities in Kumily.

On a practical note, a focus on the village as a site of environmental engagements is important specifically for India. Many developing countries are on the verge of environmental crises, requiring serious policy interventions. In recent years, there have been many organic farming and other environmental initiatives undertaken by either environmental activists/NGOs or local governments as a way to directly address rural livelihood issues. Their relative success is to be understood in terms of the direct relationship green initiatives have with village economics, as well as the relatively smaller sizes of village populations with more communicative links between residents that make communal action feasible. It is perhaps time for us to look towards villages as experimental grounds for what is called green modernity – or environmentally appropriate development that is sensitive to the needs of our era of climate crisis (Beck, 2010). This is particularly relevant in the case of developing countries where an exclusive focus on sustainable building structures and city planning, which the term “green modernity” is increasingly being exclusively associated with, might not be very feasible. A *cosmopolitan* approach towards ecology that puts both the elites and the subaltern notions of environmental responsibility at par may further show us the path towards both sustainability and social equity.

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### **Notes**

1. For a detailed analysis of the blurred boundaries between GONGOs and state departments see Sharma (2008).
2. For the rest of this article I refer to the PTR Forest Department/Periyar Foundation together as an entity as they often share personnel and resources like official vehicles, and are often perceived as a single entity by villagers.
3. Indigenous peoples in India are more often referred to as tribals or *adivasis* (literally “the original peoples”). The phrase Scheduled Tribes (ST) is also most commonly used to refer

to the several tribal communities in India, referring to a schedule of recognized tribes by the Government of India.

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