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Tamil Documentary *Naali*: Low-End Technology and Subaltern History

Abstract

My essay on the significant Tamil social activist documentary *Naali*/*The Stream* (Dirs. Murugavel and Lakshmanan, 2012) makes a strong case against the displacement of the indigenous people who live on the Nilgiris (Blue Mountains), along the borders of the states of Tamilnadu and Kerala, in South India. The film documents their lives through video footage shot with a small handycam (a 3CCD prosumer video camera) to argue for how low-end technology has enabled the empowerment of the local people by making possible the digital writing of a bottom-up history which opposes the official version constructed by the State. Nonetheless, the essay argues that this low-end technology is a double-edged sword, as it simultaneously enables "documentation" by NGOs to project the tribal people as causing the endangerment of the lives of the wild animals in the Blue Mountains. Thus, on one hand, innovations in technology and the democratization of media—enabled by the accessibility and affordability of digital video recording and editing—has inspired a lawyer and his poet/activist friend, both of whom are invested in the lives of the original inhabitants of the Blue Mountains, to critique displacement in the name of development by corporate bodies, with the connivance of non-profits or NGOs. On the other hand, the technology enables the appropriation and retooling of images of the same indigenous people to make a case for displacing them from their lands in the name of the conservation of forests and wildlife.

Key words: documentary, Indian documentary, environment, ethnic people, low-end technology, wildlife and forest conservation, NGO documentary

Introduction

The Tamil documentary film *Naali / The Stream* (Dirs. Murugavel and Lakshmanan, 2012) was shot with a small handycam: the National Panasonic NV-GS 230, a 3 CCD consumer camera.¹ According to P. Thirunavukkarasu, the publisher of the preeminent Tamil cinema journal *Nizhal*, which focuses on documentaries and short films, *Naali* has been one of the most widely screened Tamil documentaries in recent years, particularly among the ethnic populace in South India. The documentary, however, has been mainly screened in alternative spaces like schools, colleges, universities, community halls, and documentary film festivals, and has not been broadcast on public or private television channels in Tamilnadu because of its politics.² Due to the absence of funding from the state since the 1990s, the documentarians in Tamilnadu have been forced to depend increasingly on non-profits or non-governmental organizations (NGOs). *Naali*, however, is unique in that not only is it independently produced, but it also posits itself as a critique of NGOs.

Naali documents the history of the Western Ghats (a range of mountains on the west coast of India), particularly the Nilgiri (The Blue Mountain), which is located on the borders between the southern states of Tamilnadu, Kerala, and Karnataka. It focuses on the lives of the tribal people in Kodanadu, Talaimalai, Mudumalai and Wayanad areas, which are located to the west of Tamilnadu and the east of Kerala. It is a collaborative effort between Murugavel, a lawyer who is a strong advocate of human rights, and Lakshmanan, a theatre-activist who is also a radical poet. *Naali* is an extension of their public lives in the Nilgiri as a committed lawyer and a radical artist for more than a decade and it exemplifies their investment in raising awareness regarding the socioeconomic problems of the ethnic populace. The project itself became possible when Lakshmanan bought a small digital video camera in 2002 and started shooting with it while he travelled with his collaborator Murugavel to the high altitude areas of the Western Ghats. The lightweight camera that enabled one to shoot even as the other steered the motorcycle was a major factor in the production of the documentary as it allowed them to gather amateur video of the landscape and portraits of local people during their regular work-related visits to the tribal neighbourhoods on the slopes and the top of the mountain ranges of the Nilgiri. The video, which they viewed once they were back at their editing room in Erode, a city a hundred miles down the hill, gave them the encouragement to shoot further and

¹ This model was released in October 2007 and is not manufactured anymore. In fact, cameras like this marked the end of (mini dv) tape-based video shooting and prefigured the (present DSLR-Digital Single Lens Reflex-era's) SD (Secure Digital) card usage for shooting and storage. In fact, the Panasonic NV-GS was one of the rare models which offered the choice between a mini dv tape and an SD card to record.

² My *Personal Interview* with P. Thirunavukkarasu, at Chennai, in June 2013.

expand the documentary as they discovered that the tiny digital camera could withstand the cold weather and give them reasonably good images in the predominantly foggy conditions at high altitudes. They were initially unsure about the results of their shooting in the misty conditions at the top of the mountains, often at 1500 meters above sea level, as they could not carry any reflectors or lights in their backpacks that were filled with the warm clothing and blankets they needed for the four days of their stay up in the Ghats during their first unplanned trip. Their initial idea was to document the plight of tribal villagers who were the target of the wrath of elephants. In recent years, there have been increasing numbers of attacks on villagers and their homes by desperate elephants whose traditional habitats have been eroded drastically due to the connivance of corrupt government officials, mainly from the forest department, with traders, businesspersons and corporations in plundering the dense forests of the Ghats and its fertile mineral resources.³

Initially, their aim was to inform their audience through a short documentary about the condition of the people living on the Nilgiri, but as Lakshmanan and Murugavel started shooting for their documentary and interviewing the subjects, they often ended up spending many weekends travelling through the tribal areas and interacting with the locals over extended periods of time, thereby starting to learn in depth about their history, traditions, and culture. Their deeper exploration of the subject of their documentary was feasible because of the unobtrusive handycam and the small external microphone that accompanied it, as they could be put in one of the smaller pockets on the sides of their backpacks. Unlike a lawyer or a theatre performer from outside, their reaching out to the locals as documentarians with a compact camera and spending hours with the tribal people as they went about their daily life gave them an insight into their ethos: for instance, the cutting of trees like bamboo which regrew faster for creating shelters.⁴

Such deeper understanding of the ethos gradually changed the focus of their documentary: Murugavel and Lakshmanan decided to recover and showcase the long history of the Nilgiri and the rich traditions of its inhabitants, and foreground their lives and culture against a backdrop of globalization and mindless exploitation of natural resources in the name of development. *Naali*, therefore, blossomed into a painstaking effort on the part of Murugavel and Lakshmanan to counter the contemporary economic disempowerment of ethnic people by rewriting their history from the ground up. They also wanted to protest against their displacement by drawing attention to their lifestyle, which epitomizes coexistence between nature and habitats at high altitudes. The digital

³ For the attacks of elephants on villagers, see: “Jumbo Attacks Again in Coimbatore District,” *Deccanchronicle.com.*, 8 Dec. 2013, accessed 8 Sept. 2014. For the conflict between elephants and Forest Department, see: Staff Reporter, “Elephant Herd Marches on Railway Track,” *Hindu.com.*, 19 Dec. 2007, accessed 14 March 2014.

⁴ My *Personal Interview* with Murugavel at Chennai, in June 2013.

writing of such a subaltern history through a small handycam, they believed, could counter and challenge the many official versions of the government, the corporates, and the non-profits driven by vested interests.

This essay, therefore, studies how the use of low-end technology made possible the recording on video of the history of ordinary people living in the Nilgiri. More importantly, Lakshmanan and Murugavel could make the documentary from their own resources because of the economy offered by recent developments in technology, exemplified in this case by the prosumer camera that—while blurring the line between the consumer and the professional—also makes it possible to discover and work on new ideas during the making of a film. It can shoot in low light conditions and, because of the cheaper cost of recording mediums such as mini-dv tapes and SD cards, for long periods. This essay, therefore, details how *Naali* epitomizes both the recovery of the history of indigenous people and the documentation of the politics of the artists at the lower end of the spectrum: the ethnic populace of Nilgiri and the committed documentarians with their low-end technology.

***Naali* and Low-End Technology**

In this context, it would be productive for us to explore low-end technology's centrality in the very conception and execution of *Naali* during its early stages. For documentaries without external funding, the most crucial factor is the initial investment of time and labour. In this case, this could be organized around affordable technology as it offered acceptable images and sound during production (Panasonic handycam) and effective appropriation and organization of materials thereafter (Adobe Premiere editing software), thus giving an impetus to the successful production of an ambitious independent documentary without any significant external financial support. Therefore, considering *Naali*'s context within the discourse surrounding digital technology and contemporary cinema is productive in this context.

The recent discourse surrounding digital technology and the loss of the "real"—framed generally as digital cinema and the loss of celluloid cinema's 'indexical identity'⁵—does not take into account the convenience of recording which digital technology offers at the low-end of the spectrum, wherein the traces of the real can be preserved electronically instead of through the complex chemical processes involved in developing and fixing silver halides on a nitrate or polyester base, as in the case of films.⁶ Scholars are

⁵ See for details: Lev Manovich, "What is Digital Cinema," *Manovich.net*, accessed 6 Sept. 2016.

⁶ For details see: John McMullan, "The Digital Moving Image: Revising Indexicality and Transparency", *IM 7: Diegetic Life Forms II, Conference Proceedings* (2011).

either elegiac about the passing away of cinema, or euphoric about digital utopia.⁷ However, for many activists and documentarians like the ones I am detailing here, the primary question is one of having an affordable recording medium with which to catch "life unaware", as the iconic Dziga Vertov proclaimed through his documentary/experimental film *Man with the Movie Camera* (1929) almost nine decades ago. For such filmmakers, the question of having the luxury to explore various ways to enhance or manipulate the originally recorded material on location did not arise. The scholarship on new media or digital cinema is not paying careful attention to the continuing relevance of digital video and its indexicality, particularly in the context of documentaries, which in reality are not restricted to low budget ones. For instance, Errol Morris's *Standard Operating Procedure* (2008) uses photographs taken in the Abu Ghraib Prison by a small group of low-ranking military police at the prison with their cell phones. Similarly, Channel 4's documentary *Sri Lanka's Killing Fields* (dir. Callum Macrae, 2011) uses cell phone videos shot by Sri Lankan soldiers of their abuse of the men and women of the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) during the genocide of the Tamils in May 2009. Is it, therefore, enough for us to limit ourselves to thinking of events during which human rights are grossly transgressed in inhumane and often unexpected ways as the only moments when low-end technology can offer indexical recordings of reality? What about low-end technology's capacity to record quotidian lives at distant locales through its affordability and accessibility, and to lend itself to the needs of the activist filmmaker who may otherwise find it difficult to make a documentary? The small digital video camera enables these filmmakers to record the "reality" of the lives and times of the people who matter to them, apart from helping them to explore the potential and the various possibilities of the subject matter in hand by overcoming the consideration of money or funding as the primary constraint or preoccupation of the documentarian. The freedom offered affects the very process of making a documentary and—as in the case of *Naali*—shifts the focus of the narrative.

***Naali's* Context**

At this point, a brief trajectory of Indian documentary films after India's independence (i.e. from 1947 onwards) and the place of *Naali* in such a trajectory would be productive to understand its historical context. As scholars like Anuja Jain ("The

⁷ See for details, Philip Rosen, "Old and New: Image, Indexicality, and Historicity in the Digital Utopia", in *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press) (2001), pp. 301- 434. Also see, D.N. Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press) (2007).

Curious Case," 2013) and Camille Deprez ("The Films Division," 2013) have detailed, The Films Division of India, which was established in 1948, followed in many ways the model established by the British documentarians for supporting socially relevant documentaries, and was influenced by the Griersonian discourse. The early documentaries of the Films Division were focused on disseminating knowledge and educating the masses in the context of addressing the nation. As in the British documentary movement, there were many who privileged personal expression and explored the documentary as an aesthetic form beyond its objective of information and propaganda, particularly from the 1960s onward. The 1970s also saw the expansion of Doordarshan, the public broadcasting service in India, which started its national telecast in 1982. Doordarshan provided space for the national exhibition of documentaries, though it was steeped in red tape and corruption.

In the beginning, the Films Division had its own employees direct the documentaries, and later contracted outside directors and producers to make films on specific topics. For instance, Mani Kaul, the master of experimental cinema in India, also made critically acclaimed documentaries for the Films Division. In a documentary like *Arrival* (1980), he mainly worked as an outside/contracted director using the technical crew and facilities of the Films Division, whereas in *Siddheshwari* (1989), he collaborated as an outside/contracted producer who had the freedom to choose his own crew (for instance the cinematographer Piyush Shah, who was not a Films Division employee) and facilities. Doordarshan had two major ways of providing support to documentaries: one was the "funded program", in which funds for making a documentary are sought by submitting the idea and developed script in stages for approval to a committee, and the other one was "on royalty basis," wherein a film is produced and—depending on its reception and critical acclaim, for instance, winning a National Award or its acceptance in major film festivals—Doordarshan telecasts your film and pays a royalty to the maker.

The 1990s saw India shifting its economic gear from the socialism-driven Nehruvian policies to liberalization and privatization. Therefore, subsidies were taken away and funding from the government shrank for documentaries; however, non-profits and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) gradually started producing documentaries on a regular basis. Like the government, many NGOs also have their agendas, often driven by their rich and powerful donors abroad. In spite of this, some documentarians have made use of the space available through NGOs to make the kind of films they believe in, recalling Basil Wright's interventions in a film like *The Song of Ceylon* (1934), which undermines the Orientalist objectives of its sponsor, the Ceylon Tea Propaganda Board.

Naali is unique in its uncompromising stance against the agendas of the NGOs, as it perceives them as the vestiges of colonialism, particularly in the context of the displacement of the ethnic populace of the Nilgiri. The mid-1990s also saw the arrival of digital cameras in India, which facilitated the production of documentaries. However, it is only during the last five years that the production of documentaries with low-end and

affordable digital technology and their exhibition through easily available LCD projectors in alternative and remote spaces have become possible. *Naali*, produced in 2012, exemplifies such a seminal moment.

***Naali*: The Beginnings**

Naali begins with the history of the ethnic populace living on the western mountain ranges in south India, particularly the lives of the people in Kodanadu, Talaimalai, Mudumalai and Wayanad, located on the borders between Tamilnadu and Kerala. *Naali*'s writing of such a history attains its significance mainly because it remains unwritten from the perspective of these local people of the Nilgiri. There have been numerous documentaries made by the Films Division of India in which the tribal people appear in their colourful costumes as objects of spectacle as they dance in the idyllic backdrop of the mountains in the high altitudes where they live. Such exoticization has further distanced the people living on the plains from the harsh realities of the lives of the tribal people on the Nilgiri, and it is such an Orientalist representation and official history that *Naali* deconstructs right from its first frame.

The film begins with a title card "Naali: The Journey across the Blue Mountains" accompanied by the sound of birds. The soundtrack is dense, but through its indistinct quality it recalls archival material or found footage on the internet and suggests that the "Journey" suggested by the title is not the luxurious expedition or tour wherein we are going to trek along the picturesque mountain ranges of the Nilgiri with the filmmakers, but the seeking of the ordinary voices of its tribal people. The shots that follow further reinforce the objective of the documentary: a pan on the mountain ranges in a long shot from right to left dissolves into a static shot of the snow-clad Nilgiri accompanied by the sound of birds, which is now less intense due to the sudden reduction in volume. After this classically composed static shot of the Nilgiri, with a tree on the left branching into the frame, there is a dissolve again to a long shot that vertically tilts up to showcase the expanse of the mountains of the Western Ghats. A dissolve again leads us into the next shot as it zooms into the flattened snow-ridden landscape from another angle in a frame covered ornately by leaves to the music of string instruments that begins as the camera starts zooming in. This flat-white surface further dissolves into a landscape with passing clouds that acts as a wipe to lead us into a fleeting shot of two birds sitting on the right side of the frame in profile, as the voiceover recounts, "The Western Ghats have long been the backbone of South India." Thereafter, we see a long shot of the (paddy) fields in the plains as the camera now pans from left to right and comes to rest in a closer shot, along the same axis, with the two flying birds landing on their feet. The voice-over

continues: “The happiness and the misery of the (people of the) plains depend on these (people of the) mountains.”

***Naali*: Images and Sounds**

This prelude effectively prefigures the form and content of the film through the minimalism in its visual style and the juxtaposition of its rhetorical politics through its voice-of-god narration. The low-resolution visuals—not only in their uploaded YouTube version but also on the original DVD copy of the documentary—draw attention to their low-end origins.⁸ Furthermore, the use of found footage like the one with the birds further makes it clear that these documentarians are not aiming for the technical finesse of popular channels like National Geographic, but are invested in borrowing visuals freely and retooling them to illustrate what is narrated through the sound track, so that the images remain subservient to the rhetoric of the narrator.

Thereafter, the verbose narration overwhelms the soundtrack without any reprieve for the audience: there are no silent or musical segments without voiceover in this film, which has such rich possibilities for musically driven landscape montages from images available on the web and found-footage archives. The only moment when the sound allows the visual to directly speak to the audience is when the Naxalite leader (Arikkad) Verghese, who mobilized these ethnic people for an armed revolution, was killed by the cops because of insurgency.⁹ Though the narrator is silent when the camera zooms in slowly on Verghese’s photograph towards the end of the sequence, there is an elegiac song in the soundtrack paying homage to the slain leader who enabled some of them to be freed from bonded labour. Thus, this reprieve from the monotonous voice-of-god—or reverse brainwashing, in this particular case—is due to the impossibility of layering the rhetorical voice over the image of the slain revolutionary leader at the poignant moment of his death/sacrifice, rather than being an aesthetic decision.

Such an approach immediately marks *Naali* as different from the many uploaded videos— particularly at tourist spots like the Nilgiri, on sites like YouTube, Vimeo, etc.— wherein it is not uncommon to see “picnic” videos shot on DSLR cameras and cell phones that are loosely edited to popular film or keyboard music.¹⁰ *Naali* is co-written and

⁸ *Naali*, Directors Murugavel and Lakshmanan, Coimbatore: Kovan Veliyeetagam, 2012, DVD.

⁹ Naxalite or Naxalbari movement, which had its origins in Naxalbar village in West Bengal, believes in armed struggle for realizing its revolutionary objectives. See for details on the charisma and influence of the Naxalite leader Verghese: Shobha Warriar, “Where Land Reforms Have Taken Place, There are No Maoists,” *Rediff. Com.*, 27 May 2013, accessed 15 March 2015.

¹⁰ See, for instance, *Wayanad Honeymoon 2*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uUd1mOmlCaI>, *YouTube*, July 2009, accessed 15 March 2015.

codirected by Murugavel and Lakshmanan, with the latter also credited with videography and narration. The rawness of Lakshmanan's voice as a narrator, as it reflexively draws attention to his background as a street-theatre activist, also distances us from the visuals since it is permeated with a sense of urgency and anger, and is far removed from the smooth and sophisticated voices generally associated with travel diaries or autobiographical video essays. Right from the very beginning, when he categorically asserts that the plains are dependent for their well-being on the mountains, there is a plea/advocacy for empathy towards the predicament of the tribal population which pervades the film, often bordering on propaganda. In *Naali*, the monotonous voice-of-god narration—generally the staple of government newsreels in India—is undermined by juxtaposing it with the fleeting, grainy visuals that are often in soft focus because of the fog in the high altitudes of the Western Ghats or due to the appropriation from a low-resolution upload on the web. Such a counterpoint aesthetic, between the constantly changing visuals in low resolution and the monotonous sound without any fluctuation, work in *Naali*'s favour as the film focuses on the paradox of the tribal people of the Nilgiri and their centuries-old history which goes back to prehistoric times, and the significance of their eco and environment-friendly culture, even as these indigenous people are forced to give up their traditional way of life and dispossessed of their land in the name of development.

The next segment ties the mountains and plains with shots of rivers and streams flowing down and underscores how plains are dependent for their basic needs on the mountain ranges of the Western Ghats which, according to the narrator, have been enabling the rain in these regions by obstructing the westerly winds (or the southwest monsoon winds) from the Arabian Sea, like walls for the “last 2 million years approximately.” Such mentioning of historical facts with adjectives like “approximately” sets up *Naali*'s perspective on history: while acknowledging the help/advice of Mrs. Vijayalakshmi, the curator of Sullivan Museum in Kotagiri and the personnel of Nilambur Teak Museum and Wayanad Museum through the initial title cards, Murugavel and Lakshmanan make it clear that in *Naali* historical data and oral history will together serve the purposes of their politics regarding the protection of the flora and fauna of the Nilgiri and its people. Nonetheless, their attention to detail is underscored by their careful mentioning of the height of the Nilgiri as ranging from 1500 to 2000 meters and the speed of the southwest monsoon winds at 20/30 kilometres per hour.

In the following section, when the narrator details how until 200 years ago the Western Ghats were covered with greenery which prevented soil erosion, the colourful visuals from the web are dissolved with snow as a transitional device to focus on the water that flows from the Nilgiri to provide for the needs of the people in the three southern states of Tamilnadu, Kerala and Karnataka. The choice regarding the colourful visuals in this section were, however, restricted to the available videos that could be downloaded in

higher resolution. Nonetheless, some of such retooled videos are sharp and others are grainy and soft in focus. According to the editor of the film, Ashok, when the film was being edited in 2011/2012 most videos on the web were in very low resolution and became grainy and soft when downloaded and imported into the documentary.¹¹ Presently, with file-hosting and video-sharing services like Dropbox and Vimeo, it has become easier, whereas during *Naali's* postproduction it was difficult and tedious to download high-resolution videos and reuse them. Here, I would like to draw attention to the significance of transparency in the context of digital video. John McMullan claims that the "[f]ilm's shallower depth of field is what makers of movies for the cinema screen employ in order to direct the viewer's attention to a particular object/subject on screen, as well as to create a fictional narrative world with parts of the screen that a viewer cannot themselves bring into focus. It is an aesthetic of the artistic more so than the scientific: the unabashed manipulation ... for fantastical purposes. It is the *filmic look* that videographers have been attempting to emulate since the inception of video." (Italic mine, McMullan, *IM 7: Diegetic Life Forms II*).¹² McMullan, draws from Babette Mangolte to argue for how such a "film look" is predicated less on transparency and more on manipulating the shutter speed.¹³ For instance, the standard 24 frames per second shutter speed used in the shooting of a film does not allow for the kind of transparency in an ordinary pan shot, where the characters move at a normal speed, when compared with the normative 29.97 frames per second (NTSC) television standard. Therefore, for McMullan, the film look is an aesthetic that focuses on deviation from the real: "[It] lies in remediating the cinematic system of signs that implies artistry, quality, and expense; not in the realm of exhibiting a greater transparency."¹⁴ Here, what is significant for us in *Naali's* context is the fact that it was shot prior to the contemporary obsession with the shallower depth of field in digital video through the use of DSLR (digital single-lens reflex) cameras, wherein the filmmakers try to emulate the "film look." The relatively much smaller sensors in the handycam used in *Naali* broadly kept most things in front of the camera in focus. The grainy or the foggy quality in some of the shots were due to the weather which, when juxtaposed with the greater depth-of-field offered by the lens, not only gives a specificity to the look of the visuals shot at unusual altitudes, but also adds to the indexicality of the image by carrying the traces of the weather conditions under which it has been shot. Even more important, it draws attention to the sensuous but difficult colder temperatures under which the ethnic populace of the Nilgiri lives.

¹¹ My telephonic conversation with *Naali's* editor Ashok, Nov. 2013.

¹² See John McMullan, *IM 7: Diegetic Life Forms II*, imjournal.murdoch.edu.au/?media_dl=370, p. 13, accessed 3 March 2016.

¹³ See for details Babette Mangolte, "Afterwards: A Matter of Time. Analog versus Digital, the Perennial Question of Shifting Technology and Its Implications for an Experimental Filmmaker's Odyssey" in *Camera Obscura Camera Lucida: Essays in Honor of Annette Michelson*, ed. Richard Allen and Malcolm Turvey (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press) (2003), pp. 261-274.

¹⁴ John McMullan.

***Naali* and Bottom-Up History: Nilgiri and Its People**

As an advocate, Murugavel was looking for a space to foreground the “collective voice of the people of the mountains.” However, when the idea of the documentary took shape, Murugavel and Lakshmanan were not sure how much the inhabitants of the Nilgiri would cooperate or speak up in the interviews, but their earlier public life as an advocate and a street-theatre activist helped them in gaining the trust of a tightly-knit but closed ethnic community. Over the last two decades, these people have been witnessing the aggressive onslaught of the corporates who, along with the conniving NGOs and corrupt government officials, have been successful in occupying or leasing their land and displacing them.¹⁵



Lakshmanan also believed that the retooling of the stereotypical shots associated with the picturesque terrain and the ethnic people of the Nilgiri could be effectively used to contrast the romanticism surrounding the hills and the mythos of their colourful traditions with their present state of deprivation.¹⁶ Such a visual scheme of the juxtaposition of the classical with the contemporary certainly proves effective in *Naali*, as exemplified by the sequence in which the narrator informs us of their ancient lineage: an illustration with old photographs from the museum of the people belonging to ethnic groups like the Irulars, Kurumbar, Vedars, Todars, Paniyars, Muduvars, and Kothars, is juxtaposed with the immediacy of the contemporary times through a shaky handheld shot in the present which showcases eager tourists on their trip to their favourite hill station. This sequence concludes with a classically composed ancient cave painting at altitude.

¹⁵ My personal interview with Murugavel, at Chennai, in June 2013.

¹⁶ Personal Interview with Lakshmanan.

In stark contrast, the following segment has two shaky shots, apparently shot on the handycam without a tripod: one a pan and the other a tilt down that frames tourists to Edakkal caves in Wayanad district through long shots. By the choice of the long shot, the tourists are not privileged and are underscored as people in search of the exoticism of a primitive culture, as exemplified by the classical photographs that we just saw. The way the camera pans over the tourists to frame them as crawling ants is suggestive, and questions our understanding of them as tourists: it is clear that the tribal populace of today could merge with the tourists seamlessly in terms of their (modern) costume and demeanour. Thus, reflexively questioning our own interest in their exotic history, the narrator finally leads us to the cave painting to reinforce his statement that these ordinary human beings have been harmoniously living here in the Western Ghats with wildlife since times immemorial.

(Dis)empowering Low End Technology: The Double-Edged Sword

The significance of the above segment dawns on us later in the film when we realize that our curiosity as travellers is only a mask to hide our intention of poaching, as the film draws parallels between King Pazhassi's (1774-1805) supposedly benevolent encroachment/intrusion to defend the ethnic populace and the welfare measures of the contemporary NGOs that are invested in disenfranchising the tribal people of their land and displacing them from the Nilgiri. *Naali* focuses on the history of the Nilgiri through players from outside: the colonizing British and their investment in tea, coffee, and oak trees, which played havoc with the ecology of the Nilgiri and the fate of its people; the iconic kings like Kumbala Raja, who deceptively defeated the Paniyar tribe and enslaved them and the caste-driven Phalassi Raja; and the NGOs with their agenda of displacing the tribal people in the name of wildlife conservation. By progressively juxtaposing them with the everyday lives of its inhabitants, the film blurs the difference in time and space by showcasing the history of the tribal populace as a linear narrative of occupation and plunder by outside forces.¹⁷

In a narrative which echoes the cyclical and the multi-layered form of the mountain ranges of the Western Ghats, *Naali*, after setting up the ancient lineage of the Nilgiri tribes,

¹⁷ In the sequence about the planting of the teak trees by the British, the shots of Nilambur Kovilagam are framed through a handycam and contrasted with classical archival photographs and paintings. Even more striking is the interspersing of the shots taken from inside the car of the passing teak trees as they were at the time of the film's production in 2012, with other illustrative and ornate images from the past to anchor the narration. Similarly, the brief history of the industrial revolution and the consequent demand for teak in the early 19th century is framed through (museum) paintings, which bookends the shaky handycam shots of the teak trees both in full bloom and after harvest. Thus, there is a remarkably consistent aesthetic of editing which drives *Naali* from the beginning to the end, even if the documentary borrows heavily from the archival footage to structure its subaltern history.

details the history of the various oppressive feudal landlords who were disempowered by Tipu Sultan, the progressive invader from Karnataka, only to be later reinvested with their authority by the British. As an extension, *Naali* traces the continuing exploitation and displacement of the ethnic populace at the hands of the Forest Department of the Government of India, and by the devious interests of some of the NGOs that epitomize the indirect rule of the global corporates in contemporary times.

While researching the etymology of the Nilgiri, which literally means ‘the blue mountain’, Murugavel and Lakshmanan could trace its roots to a stone carving of the Hoysala period of the twelfth century, when Vishnuvardhan was the king. In accordance with *Naali*'s aesthetic of counterpoise, they balance the ethereal and colourful past invoked by the artistic alphabets carved on stone by juxtaposing it with a shaky handheld shot of the mundane Sulthan Bathery bus station. The incongruity of a small quotidian bus station stands out in a sequence that is littered with the influence of Jainism and its aesthetic finesse, as exemplified by the finely carved monks with their exquisite features and meditative poses on the stone. Nevertheless, even the poised Jaina king Vishnuvardhan defeated and ruled over the Todars, the original inhabitants of the Nilgiri. *Naali* suggests that such constant aggression by outsiders and their repeated occupation of the Nilgiri were possible because of the nomadic lifestyle of the tribal people who preferred to live in unison with nature rather than confront it. *Naali*, through such an aesthetic of interspersing the classical or ornate art work with the raw digital video shots of the quotidian life around a mundane bus station, questions our prejudice regarding the film's privileged access to indexicality: film or digital video both allow for infinite possibilities to manipulate when the accent is on the ornate or the classical rather than the immediate and the indexical. *Naali*'s low-end technology-driven aesthetic thus enables its politics of intervention through its aesthetic of contrapuntal juxtaposition, wherein the consummate/rich or the saturated is undermined in favour of indexicality of the real/imperfect/poor.

However, the same low-end technology has enabled the non-profits or the NGO's to project a different picture of the indigenous population living on the Nilgiri/Blue Mountains as being chiefly responsible for the endangerment of the wild animals. With similar handycam technology, NGO's construct narratives of a pristine land where it is not modern man with his machines, but the tribal populace who live in the mountain that is the enemy. The facility to digitally upload and subjectively modify photographs and mobilize a powerful group invested in their own interests, of benefiting from the (invisible) donors abroad, has relegated the reality of the lives of the original inhabitants of the Nilgiri to the background.¹⁸ The empowering low-end technology, thus, is a double-edged sword

¹⁸ Ibid. Ref: the photographs published in the brochure distributed. I have done extensive video coverage of the "documentation" done by the NGO's to update their donors regarding their activities in lieu of

as it can be effectively used to make a case against the disadvantaged and underprivileged people by the educated (upper) middleclass, who are conversant with the possibilities inherent in modern technology to manipulate and to further their own interests as the neo colonizers in these contemporary times of rapid globalization.

Sarah Pink in her seminal book, *Doing Visual Ethnography: Images, Media, and Representation in Research* (2007), engages with photography, video, hypermedia, and ethnography to shed light on the significance of arbitrariness and subjectivity in "visual ethnography." Though aural and visual recordings have been central to ethnography, Pink's intervention in the context of the polysemy of an image in terms of the specificity of its reception is productive for our understanding of digital technology as a double-edged sword in the context of the digitally manipulated photos/videos of the ethnic populace of the Nilgiri:

[T]he same photograph may serve a range of different and personal ethnographic uses; it may even be invested with seemingly contradictory meanings. The meanings of photographs are arbitrary and subjective; they depend on who is looking. The same photographic image may have a variety of (perhaps conflicting) meanings invested in it at different stages of ethnographic research and representation, as it is viewed by different eyes and audiences in diverse temporal historical, spatial, and cultural contexts. (pp. 67-8)

***Naali*: Displacement of People/Language**

In the final segment, after a long fadeout which marks the transition to the 1990s, *Naali* focuses on the global NGOs like the WWF (World Wide Fund for Nature, formerly World Wildlife Fund) and Wildlife Protection Society, which have been advocating for "humanless forests" with the help of local NGOs in India. *Naali*—through archival footage and photographs—narrates the attack on Ahwahnechees, the native Indian tribe of America. In 1865, Europeans gradually evicted them from Yesomite Valley where they had lived for centuries to clear the picturesque land for zoological parks and tourism. The ideology of the separation of wildlife from inhabitants originated there and led to the proliferation of several non-profits which have ever since advocated for wildlife sanctuaries and humanless forests, i.e., for the displacement of the ethnic people from the mountains and forests where they belong. Through a string of talking-head interviews interspersed with close-ups of the indigenous people of Nilgiri, *Naali* posits the greedy official machinery of the government and its conscienceless forest department as

the funds that they receive. See, the outtakes of my documentary on Tsunami relief and rehabilitation: *Waves from the Deep* (2005).

responsible for the poaching, stealing of wood, and destruction of wildlife in Nilgiri for decades. Through an insightful interview with C. R. Bijoy, an activist working for the cause of indigenous people through coalitions like Campaign for Survival and Dignity, *Naali* underpins the nexus of the NGOs, the government and the corporates, as being at the root of the misery of the ethnic populace.¹⁹ With colourful graphics, designed with the help of affordable software like After Effects (Ashok, Dec 2013),²⁰ *Naali* illustrates how agendas of a globalized economy such as carbon trading, which incentivizes governments to minimize damage to the environment through reduced emissions, have to be necessarily tied to afforestation in a growing economy like India. This unites the global corporates with the local government with its imperatives of retaining at least thirty per cent of its land as forests. NGOs join in this partnership due to the possibilities of advocating for wildlife conservation and sanctuaries: the irony is that the forest department—the real cause for the erosion of wealth and resources of the mountains and forests—is above scrutiny, but the people who had for centuries lived in harmony with nature and wildlife are getting evicted.



Protest against displacement

Nonetheless, *Naali* is honest and self-reflexive about its complicity in the disempowerment of the local populace through the dis(re)placement of language. Towards the end of the film, in a spontaneous response to the interviewer, a teenage girl reveals that in their school they are not taught their tribal language but Tamil. *Naali*, thus,

¹⁹ See for details, C.R. Bijoy, *Grain.org*, <http://www.grain.org/article/entries/629-c-r-bijoy>, 26 Oct. 2007, accessed 23 June 2014.

²⁰ My telephonic conversation with *Naali*'s editor Ashok, Oct. 2013.

reflexively draws attention to Tamil, which is the language of the people on the plains, as the language of the documentary. As it documents the displacement of the inhabitants of Nilgiri, *Naali* itself, narrated in a dominant and subsuming language, becomes a reflexive document of the erasure of their language and thereby their disempowerment, which is the conduit to the ethos of their culture. Nonetheless, Murugavel and Lakshmanan have created a space in *Naali* for quotidian voices to be heard through their retelling of the history of the Nilgiri and its people through the aesthetic of low-end technology. It enables them to strategically retool the ornate paintings and archival photos from the museum, which epitomize the vestiges of the colonizer, the feudal lords, and the decadent kings, as well as the digitally produced high-end technology driven media from the web, exemplifying the façade of globalization, corporates, and the NGOs. They have been successful in keeping the *Naali*—which means a "stream" in the ethnic language—of protest alive.

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