

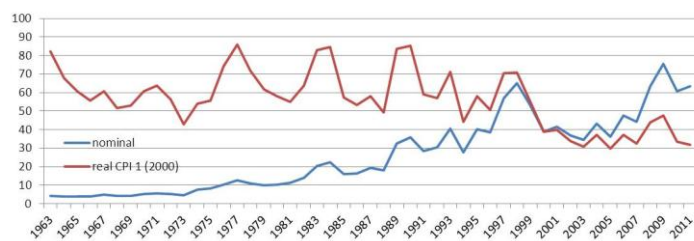
"Market, Community and Money in India: Conversations and Monetary Circuits among the South Indian Badagas"

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Abstract: *The project investigates the economy of the Badagas, a modern peasant community living in the Nilgiri-Highlands of South India. Owing to the “cultural economics” of Stephen Gudeman (1986,1990,2001) and other recent developments in economic anthropology, the project enquires into the “dialectics of market and community” to explore the dynamic construction of “local models” and how they interact with larger economic and societal developments. Thereby both the local tea industry which is mainly born by the Badagas Community and the corresponding “socio-financial landscapes” constitute focal points of our empirical research.*

After Independence in 1947 the Badaga Community became associated with the so called **bought-leaf-sector**, which, at the time, was a unique feature of the Nilgiris-region. Contrary to large tea plantations with inclusive factories and workforce, the bought-leaf industry is organized around factories that procure tea-leaves of variable quality from a large number of small-growers and sell the processed tea mainly through auction-centers. The tea-economy is capital-intensive, whereby both the capacity of the tea plant to generate (almost) weekly harvests and the extreme volatility and inelastic supply of the tea-market have triggered the formation of complex financial networks within the community.



Average auction prices at Coonoor since 1963

Integral to these developments is a remarkable **societal dynamic** whereby local tea brokers, factory-owners, leaf-agents, small-growers, and day-laborers make up significantly different categories in terms of economic power and mutual expectations. Today however, an increasing number of relatively wealthy Badagas take up new professions in- and outside the Nilgiris, facilitate higher education for their children, and employ day-laborers on their fields (which they usually continue to cultivate). Meanwhile, the majority still depends to a large extent on the incomes that are generated from tea, and suffers in particular from a **decade-long price depression**.

Notwithstanding this, the tea-business constitutes a **collective base** for almost all local Badagas which they not only represent before the state or with regard to other potential market-participants, but also maintain as a shared reference along of which they articulate and exchange ideas about the economy, local community values, and identity.



In fact, for Badagas, cooperative behavior, interdependency, hospitality and the deeds of ancestors remain highly valued forms or **“models”** that are expressed, re-articulated and called upon in various economic and social situations. Notably, aside of still vivid traditional institutions of mutual support (“telhatti” in local language), Badagas have quickly established new community-based organizations in the fields of politics, welfare, religion, sports, and business, enabling them to join for collective action far across traditional boundaries or units.

Money and Conversation

The notion that money is a social dissolvent has long ranged prominently in both public and scholarly discourse. However, our project aims to elaborate a more balanced, if not opposite perspective. Thus, observing local financial networks, we focus on how money indeed helps people to relate, i.e. how local Badagas use money to create and maintain communal ties, and how money, imbued with what people value, works as an intermediary between class and status, market and community, tradition and change.

As to that, a broad spectrum of local financial landscapes and monetary practices must be taken into account. For example, the immediate financial relations between factory owners and small-growers are commonly based on social relations which may include family- or village-ties, membership in various organizations, friend-ship circles, and political parties, as well as the maintenance and worship of the same temples. All of these involve monetary flows of their own and include financial institutions that are contextually interwoven (i.e. banks, moneylenders, pawnbrokers, self-help-groups, saving-clubs, village and temple-funds etc.).

In order to identify the various moral, social, material and symbolic aspects at play, we investigate these **monetary flows as a conversational field**. Composed of prices, wages, loans, advances, interest-rates, taxes, fees, promises, monetary gifts and donations as well as mere symbolic payments, this field – like grammar and language – offers sophisticated means to express, juxtapose, put in order, or negotiate social identities, traditional values, modern challenges, mutual obligations, individual as well as collective aspirations!

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