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Toxicities, Illegalities and Protest: A Landscape of Coal in South India

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Declaration of own work

This is to certify that the work contained within has been composed by me and is entirely my own work. No part of this thesis has been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

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Abstract

This thesis focuses on the construction and operation of state-owned coal-fired thermal power plants in Ennore, a coastal peninsular suburb located to the north of Chennai (Tamil Nadu, India). At the time of my research, Ennore was witnessing the development of nearly 2500 megawatts of coal-based energy projects, to add to the 3000 megawatts of coal-fired thermal power that was already generated on the peninsula — a situation of energy investment that stood in stark contrast with the Indian government's publicized stance about moving away from fossil fuels. To unpack the effects of this seeming contradiction, I build on thirteen months of ethnographic fieldwork (2018-2019), where I investigated the contemporary and everyday interactions of coal and coal-based infrastructures with Ennore's socio-natural and political contexts. In exploring how people in Ennore made sense of the presence of coal that surrounded their lives, the chapters in this thesis describe a 'landscape of coal' composed of three different yet related field-sites from which I observed and participated in these interactions. These sites included people's bodily engagement with the multiple toxic substances that emerged from the combustion and circulation of coal; the range of financial and contractual illegalities that came embedded with the construction and operation of the power plants; and the shifting forms of mobilization and protests staged by Ennore's residents, trade unions and health activists in reaction to coal's presence.

In researching this 'landscape of coal', I forward three interlinked arguments in the thesis. By attending to the artisanal labour of the fishermen who lived by Ennore's power plants, the first part of this thesis explores the ways in which toxic coal (together with the many by-products of its combustion and circulation) seeped through different bodies and environments. In using the analytic of "toxicity", I argue that research on coal and its infrastructures must broaden the range of its objects to consider the variegated porous relations that coal affects: between skin-born afflictions and the disappearing welfare state, between stilting rivers and changing labour markets, between embodied physical skill and sub-contracted informal work. In the second part, the ethnography moves to trade unions and explores how the ongoing presence of coal affected labour relations in and around Ennore. Through following a union leader in his meetings with different stakeholders around the power plants, I trace the ways in which coal and its circulation facilitated a range of illegalities that preserved uneven power structures and made livelihoods increasingly precarious, putting at risk any contractual binds by which labour was set to be renumerated or protected. Thirdly and finally, I foreground the 'politics of perceptibility' that residents, trade unions and activists engaged with in Ennore, as they selectively drew the attention of different publics to this landscape of coal, in a bid to further their fluctuating interests. I show how their performances oscillated between vehemently casting light upon the government's own illegal practices, and discreetly aligning themselves with various other concealed illegalities that surrounded the power plants.

As the thesis unfolds, the initial contradiction remains in the backdrop: how did different residents of Ennore — whose lives were drawn in such intimate relations with coal and its infrastructures — collectively and individually make sense of the mismatch between the effective presence of coal, and the surge of global interest in its removal? In conclusion, by looking at recent coal-linked developments that held broaden the contextual basis that surrounds this project, I show how the desire for coal-free futures is still forecasted to overlap uneasily with the ongoing presence of coal.

Lay Summary

This thesis focuses on the construction and operation of state-owned coal-fired thermal power plants in Ennore, a coastal peninsular suburb located to the north of Chennai (Tamil Nadu, India). At the time of my research, Ennore was witnessing the development of nearly 2500 megawatts of coal-based energy projects, to add to the 3000 megawatts of coal-fired thermal power that was already generated on the peninsula — a situation of energy investment that stood in stark contrast with the Indian government's publicized stance about moving away from fossil fuels. To unpack the effects of this seeming contradiction, I build on thirteen months of ethnographic fieldwork (2018-2019), where I investigated the contemporary and everyday interactions of coal and coal-based infrastructures with Ennore's socio-natural and political contexts. In exploring how people in Ennore made sense of the presence of coal that surrounded their lives, the chapters in this thesis describe a 'landscape of coal' composed of three different yet related field-sites from which I observed and participated in these interactions. These sites included people's bodily engagement with the multiple toxic substances that emerged from the combustion and circulation of coal; the range of financial and contractual illegalities that came embedded with the construction and operation of the power plants; and the shifting forms of mobilization and protests staged by Ennore's residents, trade unions and health activists in reaction to coal's presence.

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For Sumi,
Thank you for everything.

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Table of illustrations

Unless stated otherwise, all images in this thesis are my own.

List of characters

I have used pseudonyms for all the people present in this thesis.

Ambu: fisherman from Kuppam.

Arun: researcher, and a friend who accompanied me as a field assistant on occasion.

Devi: resident of Seppakkam, and Satya's wife

Ganesh: CITU member, and assistant of Sundaram

Jagdish: the convenor of an anti-corruption organisation

Dr. Jeeva: doctor from Chennai

Mari: resident of Ennore.

Mohammed: an assistant engineer at a private power plant in Tamil Nadu.

Mohan: young contract worker at the private L&T shipbuilding yard.

Murugan: fisherman and activist.

Mr. Nasir: head of operations at a private power plant.

Pandian: fisherman, and resident headman of Kuppam.

Parthi: a truck driver for a sand distributor.

Prakash: CITU member, and assistant of Ganesh and of Sundaram.

Dr. Rai: surgeon from Delhi.

Raja: fisherman from Ennore.

Ramesh: fisherman from Kuppam.

Ramya: activist.

Satya: resident of Seppakkam and Devi's husband.

Selva: young fisherman and resident of Kuppam

Selvi: resident of Seppakkam.

Simbu: fisherman and resident of Kuppam

Sriram: activist.

Sundaram: union leader and senior working committee member at CITU.

Tamizh: engineer on a contract at Vallur Thermal Power Plant.

Velu: fisherman and resident of Kuppam.

Places

Chennai: capital city, Tamil Nadu, India

Ennore: peninsular suburb in the north of Chennai

Kuppam: fishing village in Ennore

Minjur: neighbourhood to the north of Ennore

Seppakkam: village in Ennore

Acronyms

BGR: B G Raghupathy Energy Systems Limited

BHEL: Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited, a central government owned engineering and manufacturing enterprise.

CITU: Centre of Indian Trade Unions (the union wing of the CPI(M)).

CPI(M) or CPM: Communist Party of India (Marxist).

ECC: Environmental Clearance Certificate.

EIA: Environmental Impact Assessment.

HRO: Human Resource Officer.

L&T: Lanson and Turbo Shipbuilding Yard

NCTPS: North Chennai Thermal Power Station

NGO: Non-Governmental Organisation

PCA: Prevention of Corruption Act (2018).

RE: Renewable Energies.

TANGEDCO: Tamil Nadu Generation and Distribution Corporation Limited

TNEB: Tamil Nadu Electricity Board

SEZ: Special Economic Zone

Acknowledgments

In so many ways, I wish I had not kept writing this section to the end. But as I mulled over what I'd say for a while, slipping into warm thoughts about the many different people who supported this research project and me, I was overcome with remarkable sense of gratitude. It is from here, that I thank you all.

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Figure 1. The fields behind Mari's village with the SEZ power plant in the backdrop.

Introduction

"It is already inside them"

"The *companies* [in English] came and that was the end of it. Even now, if I could go, with just one net, I would have surely brought back some fish. Do you see those birds there? Those herons? If I left now and set up a net there, I would have come back with fish in no time. Even at my age."

This was what Mari told Murugan, Sriram and me on a humid February morning. Sitting under the frail shade of a narrow tree, in the barren fields behind Mari's village, when he pointed at the herons a few hundred meters ahead of us, Mari was in fact pointing to the construction site of a government-owned 1320-megawatt Special Economic Zone (SEZ) thermal power plant (see Figure 1). Towering over the birds, the SEZ power plant was the latest coal-fired thermal power plant project that was being added in Ennore, a coastal peninsular suburb located to the north of Chennai. But just over a decade ago, Mari claimed, during the monsoon months, the wetlands that surrounded his village – what he had suggested had all become 'companies' – used to swell with water and link up with the river that cut through Ennore on the western front, bringing in plenty of fish and crabs on to the patch of land where the herons stood. But that was in the past, Mari repeated. Now, he said, pointing to his body – a body that held thin arms and slender legs, and flaunted shiny white hair against roasted dark skin – he knew that "[his] time in the world would soon be over".

"What the younger men and women in my village will do, that, I don't know", Mari told us. "They are all falling sick and very few are getting jobs here."

"How are they falling sick?", asked Sriram, an environmental activist from Chennai.

"What do you mean? From there", Mari said, pointing to the SEZ power plant, "ash flies in and hits us in our faces."

Then, pointing to the side of the SEZ power plant, to a private coal yard that stored domestic and imported coal for the other power plants in Ennore, Mari said: "From there coal dust comes and hits us in the face."

Waving his hand ominously in the air, he went on: "Then they release their wastewater into the land and into that canal that is there. You see it? All the *chemicals* [in English] are killing the fish. The one or two fish that are left, those are smelling like kerosene. But what to do? Tell me, is it not best that we leave this place?"

"But where will you go?" Sriram questioned Mari. "The *companies* [in English] are everywhere now".

Standing up tall, dusting the sand that had layered his sweaty skin, Mari told Sriram:

> "I must just close my eyes and go. That is the only way to leave this place. What is the point of living here?"

Given none of us could find any response to offer Mari, he repeated himself, telling us again that the air was thick with 'coal dust' and 'ash'; that there were 'chemicals' in the water; and that people were falling sick. He then wrapped his lungi tight around his waist, and just before walking away from us, he added:

> "But if it was just me, and the older people in the village that fell sick, that would be fine. But it is not like that here. For even children who are not born yet, children who are still in their mother's womb, they are falling sick. I'm telling you: it is already inside them."

"What is the point of living here?"

Mari's statements did not come as a surprise to any of us that day. In fact, Sriram and a few other activists from the same NGO were spending the day collecting testimonies and images to document the addition of various coal-linked infrastructures in Ennore. The activists were concerned with the effects of the infrastructures on the human settlements and natural environments that neighboured them, and they had offered I accompany their team, as they needed someone handy with a camera to help them film some of their interviews. They also knew that I was an anthropologist working on a doctoral project examining the coal-fired power plants in Ennore, and that I lived and had grown up in another part of Chennai, forty kilometres south of where we had met Mari.

There were many others, as this thesis will show, who were also highly concerned with what was happening in Ennore, as they had been witnessing the steady introduction of state-owned coal-fired thermal power plants over the last two decades. In 1994 the Tamil Nadu Generation and Distribution Corporation Limited (TANGEDCO) – the debt-ridden government-owned utility company that operated and maintained most of the southern Indian state's electricity generation and distribution networks – commissioned the first unit of the North Chennai Thermal Power Station (NCTPS) in Ennore. Newer power plants and other infrastructural links thereafter found consistent addition. In particular, the NCTPS and its expansion projects were soon accompanied by the Vallur Thermal Power Station (1500MW) to its west, a fully operational state-owned port to its east, and just over a decade later, the

construction of the SEZ power plant (1320 MW)[1] on the site of the NCTPS's 'ash pond'[2]. On the very day we were in conversation with Mari, a proposal was moving up the bureaucratic ladder for approval, asking for an Adani Group[3] owned mega port to be built in Ennore in support of a projected increase in coal handling requirements. Additionally, dispersed amidst these ports and power plants, were several other industries and refineries that all mapped out within a five-kilometre radius of Mari's village.

Unfolding in the backdrop, however, while Ennore saw such an influx of coal-related infrastructural investment, was the national government's public stance that India was committed to moving away from fossil-fuels. For example, in 2015, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced the formation of the International Solar Alliance (ISA) – a group of sunshine-rich countries joining forces to promote and incorporate solar technology systems with the goal of improving Renewable Energy (RE) efficiency and collectively fostering a move away from fossil fuels. Celebrated as taking a bold and timely initiative, Modi and the Indian government were praised for their efforts in promoting RE technologies and simultaneously, publicizing their commitments towards transitioning to a more 'sustainable future'[4]. Later, at the United Nations Climate Action Summit in 2019, Modi emphatically announced that India was all set to achieve its own ambitious target of 175 gigawatts in RE generation by 2022 and even proudly declared right after that the country would commit to seeing out an impressive 450 gigawatts of installed RE capacity by 2030 (The Economic Times 2019). On full display, then again, were India's plans towards a low-carbon future.

Simultaneously, there were multiple initiatives at both state and central government level that echoed a similar engagement with RE technologies, and a move away from coal-based energies. For example, as early as 2013, the government of Tamil Nadu had introduced a series of different subsidy schemes to promote domestic solar energy use. Having

[1] In total, at the time of my fieldwork, Ennore was seeing an addition of nearly 2500 megawatts over the existing 3000 megawatts already operating on the peninsula.

[2] Ash ponds are large landfills that hold the disposed by-products of the thermal power plants. The NCTPS ash pond was located to the east of the plant. The power plant Mari pointed at, the Ennore SEZ plant, was at that time being constructed on that ash pond.

[3] The Adani Group are a Gujarat based multinational conglomerate holding diverse business portfolios from port management to renewable energy production. It is also publicly known that the chairman of the Adani Group holds close ties with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. For a succinct commentary on the Adani-Modi nexus, refer Christophe Jaffrelot's (2019) chapter titled 'Business Friendly Gujarat under Narendra Modi' in the book *Business and Politics in India.*

[4] For Sarang Shidore and Joshua W. Busby (2019) the ISA also has to be looked at as India's strategic push for geopolitical influence in a saturated renewables market. Importantly, as they highlight, the hurdles for the project are internal in that there has to be a lot of change to India's domestic solar policy for the ISA to even be a partial success.

capitalized on the state's wind energy potential, installing upwards of 8.5 gigawatts in generation capacity in a short period of time, Tamil Nadu was also home to a 650-megawatt Adani Group owned solar farm that it proudly advertised as having signed a power purchase agreement with. By mid 2020, the Solar Energy Corporation of India (SECI) had successfully distributed two unique tenders for a combined generation capacity of 1.6 gigawatts to a series of different bidders (Sivaram 2020). Designed full of projects with storage facilities, and with guaranteed peak hour power purchase at competitive market prices – thereby selling on average at rates lower than coal-powered electricity – the future was indeed marked as bright and sunny by many. Thus, the development of new markets for RE initiatives, greased with catchy sloganeering and the prospect of even more ambitious projects – like Modi's declaration at the 2018 ISA conference that the "sun never sets for the entire earth" in a bid to create one solar operated grid for the entire world (Jhawar 2020) –, overshadowed the increased investments in coal-based energy infrastructures that unfolded in places like Ennore.

This brewing tension between the Indian government's publicized stance about moving away from fossil fuels, and its seeming acceptance of sustained investments in coal-based infrastructures in particular places, what Brototi Roy and Anke Schaffartzik (2021) have recently called the "paradox of India's renewable transition", anchored my decision to conduct fieldwork in Ennore. In choosing Ennore as my fieldsite, I wanted to explore how narratives of desires for "fossil free" (Sinha 2020) futures collided with lived experiences in places that saw no immediate end to the presence of coal infrastructures – sites where those infrastructures were even growing in stature. Ennore struck me as one such place where the density of coal-linked infrastructures and investments might push this tension to play out to the fullest.

For Mari, it seemed as if there was no future worth living in Ennore. Because of the 'companies' – incorporating the 'government' and its power plants in his use of the term – Mari insisted, parsing his Tamil with loaded English words, there were 'chemicals' everywhere. *I must just close my eyes and go. What is the point of living here,* Mari asked? He would rather close his eyes and run away, momentarily succumbing to the pleasurable fantasy of finding a life somewhere else. As he narrated it, this thought had grown in him only after 'companies' had come to Ennore, which also suffused the term 'company' with the temporal significance of watershed transformations and hinted at Mari's intimate awareness of the decades-long history of both public and private industrial expansion in Ennore. The

‘chemicals’ were in the landscape he described by pointing in all cardinal directions, seeping in all the bodies that passed through it and composed it: the people, the fish, the plants, the water, air and soil. He could confirm the presence of these chemicals and thus, the companies too, by using a range of sensorial perceptions. For example, he noticed that ash habitually settled on his clothes when he left them out to dry and that he felt the coal dust prickle his chest when he coughed up a thickish phlegm. He could smell the stench of kerosene in the fish he bought from the fishing hamlets towards the coast. And even when the toxic substances remained seemingly imperceptible, like those that were inside the bodies of unborn children, Mari still knew they were there because everyone was falling sick.

At the same time, he was aware of how the ‘companies’ made plans to profit from more coal linked infrastructures, causing upheavals in the labour market, and carelessly failing at all sorts of legislative obligations, while blatantly violating labour, environmental and anti-corruption laws – such that Mari and countless others were left scrambling to make a living. The younger men and women were all falling sick and very few were getting jobs in Ennore, Mari claimed.

Figure 2. A satellite image of NCTPS ash pond from 2004. I have placed a yellow pin as to mark the site of the SEZ power plant such that it is comparable with Figure 3. [Source : Google Earth Pro]

Figure 3. The NCTPS ash pond and the SEZ power plant as of 2021. [Source: Google Earth Pro]

In his perception of the 'chemicals' that seeped their way in and around people's bodies, and in his naming the 'companies' as responsible for the transformation of a place he had known all his life, I argue that Mari described a landscape that only partly coincided with the locality of Ennore and the vicinity of the power plants. As coal flowed in and out of it, this landscape extended beyond the geographical coordinates of Ennore, involving many different people, things and places. The landscape of coal which this thesis describes unfolded as much inside people as it did around them. Here, by speaking of the 'coal' that infused Ennore, I intend not only the fossilized remains extracted from global industrial mining, but also the economies and politics that were fuelled or hampered by this earthly 'resource'– as it circulated below and above ground, was bought and sold, hoarded and burnt, ignored and loathed. For the 'companies' and the 'government' who introduced the coal-fired thermal power plants, it seemed that coal shimmered as an endless source of growth upon which they depended on.

For Mari, coal signified all matters of loss felt deep 'inside': land and fishing sites, departed kin and friends, labour and skill. But coal had also 'added' to Mari's life, seeping into him – animating a new understanding of the landscape that he inhabited. It made him

sick, dependant on costly medication, banking on the strenuous sourcing of unpolluted water. Simultaneously, coal had corroded the ways in which Mari thought of his relation to the 'government', as the looming chimneys of the companies took precedence in his landscape, indexing the government's utter lack of concern for the settlements that pre-existed Ennore's intensified industrialization. I realized that he could no more shut his eyes and run away from the 'chemicals', the 'companies' and the 'landscape of coal', than he could run away from himself.

The questions that animate this thesis took shape as I explored Ennore's 'landscape of coal' and found it impossible to perceive coal independently from the places, lives and livelihoods which it was seeping into. Thus, this thesis focuses on the coal-infused, intimate relations that Mari and others forged with a transforming 'landscape' that unfolded inside them as much as around them.

The stories I collected offer some insights into the following questions: how do people relate to the spatial and temporal landscapes that sustain their livelihoods, when those landscapes are undergoing tremendous material transformation through the steady introduction of coal and its infrastructures? In landscapes fractured by irreversible coal-based pollutions and 'illegalities', what possibilities are left for the emancipatory possibilities of labour? How do people navigate the shifting, precarious labour markets generated by the economies and politics tied to the circulation, combustion and storage of coal? What measures of harm and benefit can this navigation yield? How does coal's ongoing presence affect the modalities by which workers and residents relate to the 'government'? How are accusations of 'government' failings and violations, together with demands for governmental concern and accountability, made 'perceivable', and to what 'publics'?

This thesis takes a sideway approach to the initial "paradox" spelt out above – *voices from India's public and private sectors claim that coal is on its way out… yet investments in coal are showing no respite*. Rather than tackling the paradox head-on – for example, by exposing the extent of lies and contradictions that characterized politics under the Narendra Modi government – I chose to explore, how coal was in fact deadly real, present and perceivable for those whose lives and livelihoods were tangled with it. In other words, rather than investigating to what extent coal was effectively being replaced by renewable energies or trying to assess the success rate of such plans for transition – this thesis describes what played out in places, livelihoods and lives where coal, it overwhelmingly seemed, was only there to stay.

I present in this introduction three interlinked modalities along which the coal I encountered in Ennore infused the lives, livelihoods and places that it stayed and circulated through.

The first of those relational modalities, I refer to as 'toxic intimacies' or 'toxicities', pointing at the ways in which people in Ennore lived in a "visceral embrace" (Weston 2017:212) with the toxic substances seeping from coal.

Second, I propose we trace how coal's circulation, storage and combustion upset labour markets and intersected with fraught governmental practices, in ways that affected the relations of the 'government' to those it sought to 'govern'. I use the shorthand 'illegalities' to speak of the practices of 'corruption', legal violations and ruptures of contractual obligations that the 'government' was accused of as it dealt with coal-related economies and politics. In other words, by describing how governmental 'illegalities' affected livelihoods in Ennore, I show how peoples' understanding of the 'government' shifted, together with the accusations and demands they put forward.

Following directly from that, I argue that the third modality of relations that coal and its circulation produced in Ennore was a fluctuating 'politics of perceptibility': by that, I mean the ways by which practices perennially straddled thresholds of perceptibility, as people harnessed aesthetic and performative registers to forge desires and demands for a better life within this landscape of coal.

Thereafter, I build my methodological rubric by defining what I call a 'landscape of coal', detailing my own position within this landscape in tandem. At the end of this introduction, I offer a chapter-wise breakdown of the entire thesis, before letting the ethnography take precedence.

Toxic intimacies

'Coal ash' is the term used by scientists and engineers to designate the various forms of waste and residues produced from the industrial combustion of coal – what Mari perceived and described as "coal dust", "ash" and "chemicals". Over half of the coal ash produced by a given coal-fired power plant is generally volatile enough that it will float up to the top of the combustion smokestacks as 'fly ash'. Filters, mandated by environmental legislation in India, must be installed in the smokestacks to capture the fly ash before it is released in the

atmosphere, such that it can be collected it in solid form. A smaller portion of the coal ash ends up as solid 'bottom ash' in the furnace pits, together with its own by-product, the 'boiler slag': a lumpy, glassy material created from the contact of bottom ash with cooling water (Gottlieb et al. 2010).

Where and how the solidified fly ash, bottom ash and boiler slag are disposed of varies from one power plant to the next. At the time of my research, in Ennore, those residues were for the most part piled up into the wet landfills of 'ash ponds' – such as the one Mari pointed to, the NCTPS's ash pond, and the very place on which the SEZ plant was being newly constructed. To prevent the more volatile components from entering the atmosphere, coal ash is usually mixed with water to turn it into a slurry before being transported by pipes to the ash ponds– a practice that, in turn, can caused the ash ponds' contents to leak and seep into the land and water bodies around Ennore, especially given the poor state of many of the connecting pipes. Meanwhile, fly ash filters in the smokestacks of Ennore's power plants were often poorly maintained, meaning that volatile particles of 'fugitive dust' (Gottlieb et al. 2010) could make their way into the air flowing in and out of the power plants. Thus, through the industrial combustion of coal and the management of its residues and waste in Ennore, the substances contained in coal ash were released in high proportion in the air and in neighbouring water bodies – causing acute, permanent harm to a range of living organisms. Quoting at length from a report drafted by a United-States based environmentalist organisation:

> "Typically, coal ash contains arsenic, lead, mercury, cadmium, chromium and selenium, as well as aluminum, antimony, barium, beryllium, boron, chlorine, cobalt, manganese, molybdenum, nickel, thallium, vanadium, and zinc. All can be toxic. Especially where there is prolonged exposure, these toxic metals can cause several types of cancer, heart damage, lung disease, respiratory distress, kidney disease, reproductive problems, gastrointestinal illness, birth defects, impaired bone growth in children, nervous system impacts, cognitive deficits, developmental delays and behavioral problems." (Ibid.)

Environmental activist and scholar Rachel Carson writes that the pollution caused by inorganic toxic substances like those contained in coal ash is "for the most part irreversible", affecting for indeterminate spans of time the "world that must support life" and the living tissues that those toxicities seep into (1962:6).

As Mari made strikingly clear, speaking to us on the outskirts of the new SEZ coal-fired thermal power plant, temporalities go amiss in the case of such irrecoverable pollutions.

Living in a “landscape awash with toxicities” can fill one with the idea or the feeling that “there is no escape” and “no place to run” (Tsing et al. 2021), as Mari stated in ominously echoing words when I met him. Such ‘suffocating’ landscapes (ibid.) are of course not unique to Ennore, and can be found across the planet, as the global extraction and circulation of so-called earthly resources – from fossilized carbonate matter including coal, oil or gas, to metallic ores ranging from gold to uranium – has yielded tremendous toxic waste, participating in what Gabrielle Hecht calls “the large-scale rearrangement of substances that materially constitutes the Anthropocene” (2018: 135). Industrial capitalist activities and their infrastructures put those toxic substances into circulation, further expanding the breadth of contamination, in turn producing more by-products, residues and waste. Critical geographers and others have described earthly resource extraction as a central mechanic of capitalist accumulation showing how it works hand in hand with past and contemporary colonial projects (e.g. Ballard 2003, Singh and Harris-White 2019).

Indeed, industrial extractive projects and their infrastructures routinely and ongoingly ignore the human settlements located in their vicinity, further marginalizing those places and their residents, and turning them into the very sites where industrial waste and residues are disposed of (Auyero and Swistun 2009, Engels 2010). Scholars from Indigenous, Black and post-colonial studies have further shown how the bodies of residents themselves become residual in extractive projects, if not the very sites from which even more value is extracted (Kikon 2019, Mbembe 2017, Hughes 2017). While those practices are particularly striking in contexts from the Global South, they are not limited to it: the United States, to cite but one example, is replete with cases of harmful disposal of toxic industrial refuse in areas where the vast majority of residents identify as racial minorities, working class or indigenous (Powell 2018, Anand et al. 2018, Fennell 2015). As Dana Powell (2018) argues, drawing on her work with Navajo communities affected by the construction and operation of coal-fired thermal power plants in the United States, the need is urgent for tracing the changing histories and topographies of responsibility, and to hold power accountable for the damage wrought.

At the same time, ethnographic cases have led some anthropologists to also look beyond the explanatory frameworks of political economy, and to deepen their analyses of the topographies of power through which toxic contamination occurs. Drawing on her ethnography of uranium mining in colonial and post-colonial Gabon, Hecht (2018) suggests that an analysis of the harm caused by toxic waste must not limit itself to “standard accounts of capitalist/colonial exploitation” but should simultaneously consider multiple other objects

of observation and scales – both larger and smaller, not necessarily encompassed into each other and often colliding with each other with high degrees of "friction" (Tsing 2005). Similarly, Alex Nading adds that what he calls "an anthropology of toxicity" would gain from going beyond "forensically unpacking the decisions and regulatory structures that gave rise to given toxic moments" or searching for "a politics of correction or mitigation" (2020: 219). While he writes that anthropologists should remain critical of all-to-easy projections into purified toxic-free futures (see also Langwick 2018), he suggests the discipline might be better placed to uncover other ways of understanding the toxic present (Nading 2020).

While my research does engage with tracing causes and allocating responsibility for toxic contamination and its (mis)management, it also follows Nading's suggestion about revealing a present that was infused with chemical toxicities for many. Indeed, my ethnographic findings in Ennore didn't always fall neatly into accounts of "who" or "what" causes and circulates coal-related toxic substances, or simple descriptions of how those toxic substances might be cordoned off and their effects remedied – and hardly anyone who spent time in Ennore was naive enough to hold any hopes for a near or distant future purified of coal's presence. Instead, I was increasingly drawn to describing the ways in which coal had infused the lives of those who – like Mari, and many others I met on the way – had little choice but to live in the present, intimate, 'visceral embrace' of coal's toxic waste, by-products and residues.

Consider a series of quotes collected by the same NGO Sriram worked for, in a village called Seppakkam, located in the immediate vicinity of the ash pond Mari pointed at:

> "If we wash our face with local *panchayat* [village administrative unit] water, it becomes dry and white spots start appearing on the skin. I get frequent boils (like pimples) on skin because of the water"
>
> "In rainy season, water will stagnate till knee level and get mixed with bund water (ash slurry water). Kids will see fishes in bund water, get excited and few kids have fallen inside that bund water."
>
> "My family gets money from rearing cows. That money is entirely spent for water and medicines. It is very difficult for us to survive here."
>
> "My husband used to work in a coal company (Chettinad Coal Company). Currently he is unemployed and looking for another job. He left his job at the coal company because he used to get chronic stomach pain. When we consulted the doctor, they asked him to get scan done and to intake more fibrous food. Doctors said that there were black deposits inside his stomach. Fearing ill-health, he left the job. His stomach pains have stopped after he quit."

All of the quotes presented above uncover how toxic substance seeped into many aspects of daily life in Ennore, showing us how the relationships they weaved with people were not only about "bodily harm" but also about transformed "socioecological relationships" (Nading 2020). In Ennore, this included increased medical expenditure for the families who lived by the ash pond, different experiences of playtime for children who jumped into pools of rainwater and adverse costs for employees in the industries that supported Ennore's coal infrastructures. Here, the flows of coal-linked toxic substances through air, water, land and living tissues opened to a range of new relational modalities, affecting people's understanding of the shifting, porous boundary between their own bodies and all that was around.

"Toxicity", thus, as I use it in this thesis, indexes a relationship of "intimacy" between toxic substances and people, places or things. Here, I follow Kath Weston's example (2017) in drawing the concept of 'intimacy' away from the realm of kinship studies (e.g. Geschiere 2013) or affect theory (Berlant 1998) in which it generally operates – while also expanding from the more metaphoric cases of the "intimate" relations to imperial power (Stoler 2006) national projects (Herzfeld 1997) or political dissent (Amarasuriya et al. 2020). Instead, by considering Mari's "intimacy" with the coal-related "chemicals" seeping into his body and flowing through the landscape, I want to describe relationships that included human sociality but unfolded beyond it as well. I follow Weston's interest in the sense of spatial and social proximity that the term "intimacy" conveys, and that I find well-suited to address the ways in which the closeness of coal and its infrastructures made it a matter of concern for the people I met in Ennore. Catherine Fennell (2015) makes a similar point. In tracing people's changing relations to the various toxic substances seeping from aging building materials, and into the homes of socially-housed people in Chicago, she shows that people's ambivalent attachment to buildings was linked as much to painful experiences of toxic harm, as it was to pleasurable sensorial memories of heat and sweat.

In a similar vein, Weston argues that "intimacy" can be both harmful or beneficial and speaks of modes of relation that "do not automatically lead to empathy or identification" which helps me depart from some of the more positive connotations that the term 'entanglement' has recently conveyed. Elisabeth Roberts (2017) makes a contribution to a similar line of argument, by considering the unevenly intimate relations of toxic substances to differently situated bodies (see also Agard-Jones 2013; King 2016). Drawing on her ethnography in a Mexico City working class neighbourhood, she shows that for marginalized

residents, toxicity could be a double-edged sword, offering them protection from the harmful scrutiny of police and health officials who kept clear from homes and neighbourhoods where one could not avoid "breathing shit".

Thus, in revealing the intimacies that many shared with the toxic in Ennore, I wish to show how coal-based toxicities not only signalled immense socio-natural and bodily harm, but also fuelled other desires, where some were willing to draw amity with the toxic in an uncertain bid for better returns. While coal-based 'toxicities' rarely seemed beneficial – unlike those that might be knitted with other toxic substances and environments (Roberts 2017) –, to think of such 'toxic intimacies' remains an important way to consider how people live with the toxic, in the present. It is here that this thesis makes a contribution within the current debates around the anthropology on toxicity.

Alongside coal-based 'toxicities', the following section considers other relational modalities that were infused in coal: what I signal as 'governmental illegalities'. In the next paragraphs, I show how coal and its infrastructures got tangled in the fray of people's relation to the 'government'– a term in which my interlocutors included both central and state-level governmental administrations, and state-administered companies such as TANGEDCO. As the following will show, the density of governmental illegalities that suffused Ennore indexed a relation of the 'government' to the populations it sought to govern that had little to do with textbook democratic politics (Chatterjee 2004, Gudavarathy 2012). It also interrogated the space left for political agency and change in Ennore's 'landscape of coal'.

Governmental illegalities and 'the politics of the governed'

"Corporate offenders"

On a dusty day, walking with a journalist friend of mine on the ash pond which happened to double up as the construction site of the new SEZ power plant (see Figure 2 & 3), we met a truck driver called Parthi, who told us he was employed by a private firm that bought fly ash from TANGEDCO. His truck was due to be filled up with some of the ash later in the evening, he told us. I asked Parthi if he was employed by a cement manufacturing company I had heard of – an industry that often-signed partnership agreements with coal-

fired power plants for the purchase of fly ash, which could be recycled as an ingredient for cement. Parthi, sounding wary at first, eventually told us that he did work for a cement factory. When my friend asked Parthi if he could tell us which factory it was, he laughed and asked us if we knew how deals worked in Ennore.

"I'm sure you're paying TANGEDCO off", my friend said jokingly.

Agreeing to tell my friend more, on the condition his name remained out of any report he might write, Parthi told us he was in fact employed by a private enterprise that traded not in cement – but in sand. They paid hefty bribes to TANGEDCO officials (passed from hand to hand through a chain of sub-contractors) so they could collect certain amounts of fly ash and use it to artificially lengthen the sand they sold. The prices for such deals fluctuated, Parthi added, telling us that they went up whenever there was a shortage of sand in the construction market. Fly ash, at those moments, was a coveted good, Parthi claimed, adding that his employers were not the only enterprise making such deals. There were countless non-contracted cement companies, sand traders, brick manufacturers and other "chemical" industries who tapped into what he loosely termed a lucrative fly ash 'business'.

> "I can tell you one thing", Parthi said before leaving us. "The TANGEDCO officials surely eat well, they can feed on biryani every day."

Fly ash is a useful additive to cement mixes, enhancing their cohesiveness. When mixed in sand, however, it becomes an adulterant that only lengthens sand, in violation of all construction standards. Parthi's employers were dealing in a branch of what the media decried as India's "adulterated sand racket" (TOI 2012, see also Jeyaranjan 2019), in turn fuelling multiple forms of governmental corruption. Indeed, the fly ash business only went forward, as Parthi hinted, because it left the pockets and stomachs of TANGEDCO officials well-greased, in clear violation the 2018 Prevention of Corruption Act (PCA) that marked the act of receiving and offering bribes (unless forced) as a criminal offense. The contracting practice which Parthi described – whereby private contractors paid TANGEDCO to collect the fly ash refuse – also marked a serious breach in the Tamil Nadu Transparency in Tenders Act (1998) that required government-run companies such as TANGEDCO to make public their dealings with private enterprises through a competitive bidding process.

However, I knew that things were not as simple as Parthi suggested when he claimed that TANGEDCO officials could happily spend the bribes they amassed on daily feasts. A few months before speaking to Parthi I had interviewed an anti-corruption activist, and his stance on the matter had helped contextualize Parthi's claims:

> "Many engineers at the TANGEDCO power plants have themselves paid exorbitant bribes to higher officials to get their promotion. Don't they need to make that money back? That's how it works. They [the engineers] will just find every possible way to collect bribes when handing out contracts. It is a spiral."

The spiralling exchange of bribes, described by the anti-corruption activist as the only way to access higher positions within TANGEDCO's workforce, was in blatant violation of the PCA. At the same time, it all but forced TANGEDCO employees into bribe-giving and -taking, giving us a glimpse into the fraught workings of Ennore's coal-related work relations, and, more importantly, into the government's own meddling in those. Parthi himself held a short-term labour contract with a private enterprise that was involved, as we've seen, in illegal subcontracting relations with TANGECDO. Quite telling here, was my journalist friend's own reaction to Parthi's assertions:

> "This is the first time someone has spoken so openly to me. While most won't even respond to my questions about what TANGEDCO is doing here, some will give me a little information and then tell me they will lose their jobs if they speak for longer. Their sub-contractors will fire them, so many have claimed."

Parthi's reticence at being cited in my journalist friend's report signalled his fear that his short-term 'contract' job could be terminated at his employer's whim. This only illustrated a situation which this thesis will later describe at length (Chapter 2, 3 and 4): the association of public sector workplaces with private contractors and subcontractors, the lengthening and opacification of global supply chains (Tsing 2015), and the overall 'precariousness' of work and labour relations (Cross 2010, see also de Neve 2005). A straightforward effect of the worldwide deregulation of labour markets under such 'neoliberal' forms of governance is that labour legislations tend to be weakened, with flexible employment arrangements becoming the norm (Molé 2010). Yet as Jamie Cross (2010 & 2014) has argued, in the Indian context, "insecure and unprotected labour relationships" have long been "resolutely unexceptional", pointing at the different histories of labour that come to inform India's industrial zones. And, sticking to this line of thought, as Chapters 3 and 4 will go on to illustrate, whatever labour laws existed or remained in Ennore's workplaces (most often in the public sector) were in any case routinely violated.

In addition to being accused of corruption, the routine violations of labour laws and the "precarious-ization" of labour relationships (Molé 2010), the 'government' was widely indicted with flouting a string of environmental laws and court orders. Take for instance what activist Sriram, whom we met at the start of this chapter, had to say about TANGEDCO's

construction of a new bridge in Ennore. Quoting at length from a post he had published on Facebook, the social networking site:

> "I have travelled to the most abused parts of the world. But nowhere have I seen the sheer impunity with which corporate offenders desecrate a water body as we see happening in Ennore with the Kosathalai River's backwaters.
>
> … TANGEDCO has already damaged more than 1000 acres of the backwaters with a choking cake of coal ash more than 4 feet deep… Now, even as its old rusting pipelines continue to spew ash into the creek, TANGEDCO is constructing a new bridge blocking the river for a new pipeline with none of the mandatory permissions from the Union environment ministry or the Tamil Nadu Pollution Control Board.
>
> …200 metres from this crime scene lies an even graver scene of crime. Here TANGEDCO claims to be constructing a coal conveyer corridor for its Ennore SEZ [power plant]. For this it has dumped about 2 metres of dredged sand moved illegally from the Kamarajar Port over a tidal waterspread area of more than 3 acres, smothering mangroves and blocking tidal water flow."

Sriram's post made the scathing accusation that TANGEDCO was no more than a "corporate offender" that had violated numerous environmental and coastal zone regulations which were intended to protect the wetlands, marshes, creeks and rivers that made up the Ennore peninsula. The bridge and the conveyor corridors, Sriram argued eloquently, plainly amounted to "crime scenes".

The accusations spelt out by Parthi and Sriram were all indicative of the discourses on corruption and legal violations that were attached to narratives of the 'government' and its actions in Ennore, and more generally in the Indian context. The classical definition of 'corruption' formulated by Joseph Nye is that of a "behavior that deviates from the formal duties of a public role (elective or appointive) because of private-regarding (personal, close family, private clique) wealth or status gains" (1967:416). Scholars have pointed to the pervasiveness of forms of 'corruption' within India's administrative departments (Wade 1984, Das 2001, Gupta 2012), but they have also argued that dioscourse of corruption can be even more pervasive. They have gone on to describe contexts in which it became unclear, asked what a previously 'incorrupt' order might have looked like, so that they shifted their analyses away from normative assessments of practices of corruption, and toward the practical effects of discourses of corruption (Parry 2000, Anjaria 2011, Björkman 2015a). Others, still, have uncovered the range of criminal networks that hold considerable influence over India's public-sector enterprises (Harris-White and Michelutti 2019) and the chapters of this thesis adds to the literatures on legal violations, by documenting some of the

countless illegalities which characterized the government's coal-related practices in Ennore, in what Mukul Kumar (2022) terms a vicious market-based "fossil neoliberalism".

Yet, as the coming ethnography will also make clear, while considering 'governmental illegalities', this thesis does not take 'law' itself as its central focus. Instead, during fieldwork, as I followed coal in and around Ennore, I was struck by the ways in which people *related* to the amalgamation of 'governmental illegalities' taking place along the trajectories of coal's circulation and combustion, coming to see them as part of the 'landscape of coal' which residents and workers engaged with daily. The pervasiveness of those illegalities, I argue, exposed the changing relationship between the government, its (theoretical) citizenry and those whom it merely governed – even prompting the latter to challenge their positions as subjects of governmental policies and control, and to hold the government accountable for its actions.

The politics of the governed

In his writings on what he calls "the politics of the governed" – or the ways by which 'actually existing democracy' works for most people, in most parts of the world – Partha Chatterjee shows how, in the context of postcolonial India, the relation between the government and the majority of the populations it aims to govern has very little to do with the "constitutional depiction of the relation between the state and members of civil society" (2004: 38). In extension, Chatterjee introduces the concept of 'political society' to better evaluate how those who fall beyond the conventional boundaries of civil society (a small section of urban middle and upper-class elites in nation-states like India) interacts with the state. As Ajay Gudavarthy explains in a more recent discussion of Chatterjee's work, 'political society' is a terrain from which governed populations engage in practices that are "essentially political but look uncivil from the point of view of civil society" (2012:1-2). The members of those populations – in earlier writings, characterized as 'subaltern' by the eponymous group of scholars (Chatterjee included), who sought to give them voice – are thereby reduced to "targets of policy" by various government institutions, stripped of all substantive forms of citizenship.

'Political society', therefore, can be understood as the "site of negotiation and contestation opened up by the activities of governmental agencies" (Chatterjee 2004: 74). In theory, subaltern members of 'political society' relate to the government in ways that would depart from the "ethical connotation of participation" that is attached to 'civil society',

instead resting on forms of "contextual negotiation" (Chatterjee 2004:5-6). Chatterjee describes the means by which members of political society negotiate with the government:

> [Their claims] could only be made on a political terrain, where rules may be bent or stretched, and not on the terrain of established law or administrative procedure. The success of these claims depends entirely on the ability of particular population groups to mobilize support to influence the implementation of governmental policy in their favor. But this success is necessarily temporary and contextual. The strategic balance of political forces could change and rules may no longer be bent as before. (Chatterjee 2004: 60)

Many scholars have engaged in lively debates over the conceptual and empirical relevance of the 'political' and 'civil' society' binary (see for example Kumar 2022, Parry 2020, Gudavarthy 2012, Harrison 2012, Sundar and Sundar 2012, Coelho and Venkat 2009). As Jonathan Parry writes, much of the 'political/civil society' argument "floats ethereally above the consideration of specific empirical evidence", and it is particularly unclear who the 'subaltern' members of 'political society' are, or "which democratic values the subalterns do not grasp, which subalterns have that difficulty and why" (2020:12). Indeed, Parry adds, it may not be that those people "fail to understand the democratic ideals of the elite but that they have a well-founded mistrust of the local state's commitment to upholding them" (Ibid.).

Other scholars have argued that the concept of 'political society' does not help us consider how 'subaltern' members sometimes go at lengths to legalise their interactions with the government. For example, in his study on local youth clubs in rural West Bengal, Tom Harrison (2012) shows how rural residents attempted to formalise claims for citizenship by devising a range of routinised legal practices that resembled those put to work by civil society members, while simultaneously harnessing pre-existing political networks to facilitate quick and effective access to government resources. Drawing on his study of anti-nuclear movements in Tamil Nadu, Rahul Mukherjee (2020) shows how the government was violent in its response towards a largely rural anti-nuclear movement and more receptive towards the concerns voiced by middle-class urban 'civil' groups. Writing on neighbourhood associations in Chennai, Karen Coelho and T Venkat (2009) similarly observed that 'political' and 'civil society' frequently overlapped, as the urban poor couched their demands in legal terms, while middle class urban residents were compelled into interminable negotiations with governmental agencies.

Nevertheless, as Rahul Mukherjee also suggests, the conceptual pair 'political/civil society' remains "helpful in explaining general trends", before further ethnographic research

can come and complicate an all-too neat divide (2020:30). For example, his own research further showed that despite the rural anti-nuclear activists forging their struggle together with that of members of the urban middle-class, in mutual attempts to further a unified cause, the urban activists ultimately worked at preserving their own privileges. This, Mukherjee argues, ultimately reconstituted the civil/political divide, yet not as neatly as in the original formulation

My own ethnography speaks of some of the ways by which people who could be considered as members of 'political society' – like Mari and Parthi, but also middle-class city-based activists such as Sriram and Murugan, who chose to work alongside Ennore's residents and their struggles –, made demands of the government 'as if' they were right-bearing citizens. Consider how Sriram ended his Facebook post by an appeal to the "trust" that the government should strive to "win" from its "people":

> "If the current government wishes to win people's trust, it must walk its environment talk by demonstrating that TANGEDCO is not above the law. It must put an immediate halt to the ongoing illegal constructions inside the water body, and begin reversing the damage."

Simultaneously, I also describe how other people mobilised to uncover and challenge 'governmental illegalities' (see Chapters 4 and 5). Tracing coal, its causes and its effects, offers a different lens on this question: how do the 'subaltern' relate to the government? How do accusations of 'governmental illegalities' – as either the demands for the implementation of existing legal frameworks, or as the recognition of its violation by the state – become the site for struggles that certain people and groups mobilised to contend with, aiming to hold the state accountable for its informal, illegal and criminal actions? What happens at these points of contestation?

I suggest that these questions are extremely important given the recent scholarship (e.g. Khaitan 2020, Ganguly 2019, Sircar 2020) that has discussed how India's central and state led or allied Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) governments have clamped down on dissenting organisations, populations and individuals, sometimes even with extrajudicial force, with Tamil Nadu being no exception. The police firing in Thoothukudi that killed fourteen protestors who had peacefully gathered to demand the closure of a polluting corporate-ran copper factory, the disappearance of an environmental activist days after he had released incriminatory evidence about the government's role in the firing, even the case of the custodial death of two shop owners during the COVID-19 lockdown for supposedly

questioning the police, stem under what Hugo Gorringe and Karthikeyan Damodaran (2020) have called a "culture of impunity" that has allowed the police, under the governments watch, to act violently on dissenting populations. Thus, while what I call governmental illegalities were only rampant throughout Ennore, it went hand in hand with a 'culture of impunity' that allowed police action and other excesses of governmental power to come down on those who chose to challenge the government or uncover the government's own non-compliance with law.

Nevertheless, many in Ennore still took it on to challenge the government, in ways that blurred legal claims-making with 'contextual negotiations' (Chatterjee 2004). Many, as I show in the next section, found creative and risk-laden ways to "navigate" (Vigh 2009) and "mediate" (Bear 2014a, Björkman 2015b) the 'toxicities' and 'illegalities' that saturated Ennore's 'landscape of coal', forwarding a host of demands in the process. This happened through what I call a 'politics of perceptibility'.

Politics of perceptibility

One night, after I had spent the evening at a public conference that was organised by Sundaram, a trade union leader whom we meet at length in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4, I met the activist Murugan on my ride back home from Ennore. He was standing by the side of the road in the neighbourhood of Royapuram – a residential zone in the north of Chennai that commenced after a long stretch of highway as one exited Ennore towards the city.

"Are you in a hurry?" Murugan asked.

When I replied that I wasn't, he told me he was about to meet someone for a chat that would not last more than thirty minutes, so if I was willing to tag along with him, we could both share a ride home on my motorbike after the meeting was done. Curious to know more, I agreed. Murugan explained that his meeting was with a man called Thomas, who was the head of a union that represented local fishers. The week before, Murugan went on sternly, India's central government had approved an amendment to the 2011 Coastal Regulation Zone Notifications that would facilitate approval for industrial and real-estate construction across India's coastline with far less requisites. Murugan, a member of the same environmental NGO as Sriram, and a fisherman himself, had spent the days after the news broke, detailing a

pamphlet that laid bare how the easing of the law would adversely affect India's coastal communities and environments.

> "He [Thomas] has political ambitions", Murugan went on explaining. "Whatever his intentions might be after, he will surely make sure more people know what the *government* [in English] is doing. He wants to make a name for himself."

Our meeting with Thomas, in fact, lasted much longer than thirty minutes. Murugan patiently detailed what the amendment to the law allowed on the coast and more importantly, listed the objections that the activists had spelled out, frequently asking Thomas if he had any questions. While Thomas never had any questions, he repeatedly faltered when Murugan tested him about what was on the pamphlet. This went on for a while, until Thomas, on Murugan's instructions, read out the contents of the pamphlet aloud.

> "Read it like this a few times", Murguan said. "Understand it. After that, you can add your name and organisation and go straight for a press meet."

Thomas appeared content with what had been given to him. And so did Murugan. On our way back home, he told me that he engaged with Thomas despite knowing that he, as a union leader and a possible future politician, could turn out to have "bad intentions". But Murugan also knew that Thomas's current interest was in challenging the incumbent government, so he could foster his own public image as a person ready to stand for the "rights of the fishers".

> "So he'll [Thomas] organise a press meet. He might even organise a protest. He has sufficient clout, and that is important because more people listen to him. There is a lot of bad that can happen, but I believe something good will come out of this. I don't know when that will be, but I want the best for the fishers' and people like Thomas are important." Murugan paused, before adding: "I did this because people need to know! That is my job. Otherwise every place will become like Ennore."

Murugan had identified Thomas as having access to the material resources required to generate visible publicity around the additional toxicities and illegalities that a change in the coastal regulation would cause. As a union leader, Thomas could address speeches to eager audiences, he could organize press conferences, and he might even be able to stage spectacular protests. It is this ability to make things 'known' to 'people' that mattered to Murugan, however different the two men's ultimate purposes might be – with the constant risk, he well knew, of Thomas's political ambitions one day running at odds with his own commitment to the betterment of Tamil Nadu's coastal communities. I suggest that with his

claim that "people need to know", Murugan was pointing at a very particular notion of both what counted as 'knowledge', and who or what came to constitute the 'people'. In doing so, I push three points forward, that will inform much of the reasoning on political agency developed in this thesis.

First, by knowledge, here, I argue that Murugan in fact intended a repertoire of situated tactics which would enable those who 'knew' to navigate a landscape awash with both toxicities and illegalities. To live in Ennore, one had to 'know' where and when any given illegal/legal line was being reshuffled, or any boundary disrupted by seeping toxicities, what were the stakes of the government and of other forces in blurring or maintaining those lines. This knowledge was key, in fact to understanding how to position and move oneself to limit personal harm or increase general benefit. Given both the density and the mutability of the illegalities and toxicities floating around Ennore's landscape of coal, I follow Henrik Vigh (2009) in speaking of "navigation" to describe "the act of moving in an environment that is wavering and unsettled", by putting in play the "qualities needed to make the best of emerging problems and possibilities". The idea of navigation, as Vigh highlights, is reminiscent of Michel de Certeau's (1988) formulation of "tactics", and often observed in the "practical knowledge" enacted by marginalized or oppressed groups (Scott 1998). But while de Certeau marks an analytical difference between the "strategies" (of domination) involved in structuring space and legally fixating institutions or limits, and the "tactics" (of subversion) that flowed around those structures and rules, I observed that, in the case of Ennore, tactics and strategies often operated hand in hand. For instance, what was presented by the government as law-making could easily become a set of tactical practices, once the government itself set out to trade in illegalities and toxicities. Reciprocally, the oppositional tactics of a charismatic labour union leader (like the person we meet in Chapters 3 and 4), aiming at countering governmental practices, could also work together with a strategic re-inscription of legal or contractual limits.

Here, we see how situated 'knowledge' was crucial for those who took an active part in the coal-suffused landscape I describe. However, and this is the second point I want to make, 'knowing' (or making known to others) a situated layout of illegalities and toxicities could not happen through merely stating or emplacing those – as Murugan was well aware of, when he sought out additional publicity for the factual explanations he had carefully spelt out in his pamphlet. Rather, in Ennore, knowing had much to do with seeing, sensing, or feeling: that is, with embodied engagement with material objects, and with the 'affective' atmospheres

that those objects could convey and discharge (Mazzarella 2009). This brings me back to how I interpret Murugan's summoning of 'people', in his claim that "people need to know": rather than invoking a well-defined audience – identifiable with, for instance, a group of local fishers, the residents of a contaminated village, engineers, or unionized power plant workers –, 'people', here, had more to do with the open-endedness of a 'public' addressed by the material contents of speeches, press meets and staged protests (Chowdhury 2019, Cody 2011, Warner 2002).

The third point builds up as a consequence of the two previous ones. Throughout this thesis, I will attempt to describe what I call the 'politics of perceptibility' that unfolded through Ennore and beyond. By that expression, I am thinking of practices of political agency that attempted to elicit sensorial and affective effects in the publics they addressed; in other words, practices that engaged 'aesthetically' with the toxicities and illegalities that layered Ennore's landscape of coal, by shifting the coordinates of what was visible and what remained opaque. In coining this 'politics of perceptibility', I draw inspiration from philosopher Jacques Rancière's joint consideration of aesthetics together with the political (2004; see also Larkin 2013, 2018). For Rancière, aesthetics designates not only what gives itself to human perception and judgement (in line with earlier formulations by Immanuel Kant), but it also sketches a realm of the perceivable – the 'sensible', in Rancière's terminology – that it is always fragmented and unequally accessed by differentially positioned people. Aesthetics, Rancière writes, is "a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise" (2004:13). Thus, any political act necessarily and simultaneously deals in aesthetics: indeed, the disruption that the political brings forth will also reshuffle the pre-existent partitioning, blurring the lines of what and who can be perceived, and by whom. Conversely, acting upon the limits that unequally distribute the sensible, amounts to a practice of political agency.

To the keen eye, then, a 'politics of perceptibility' is readable in a practice like Thomas and Murugan's joint attempt at disrupting the imminent legislative actions of the central government, by making those actions 'known' (or better: 'perceived') by publics who would otherwise not have been aware of them. In staging speeches or distributing flashy pamphlets, they traded in some of this politics/aesthetics. However, as I followed coal through Ennore, I encountered sites where the politics of perceptibility took far more impressive forms, with aesthetic and performative practices operating on much grander scales: those sites were, as

this thesis will describe at length, a number of spectacular public events, conferences or protests staged by labour unions (Chapter 4) and activists (Chapter 5).

A landscape of coal: methods and analysis

By thinking with the rubrics of 'toxicities', 'governmental illegalities', and the 'politics of perceptibility' that were attached to the presence of coal in and around Ennore, the chapters in this thesis describe a 'landscape of coal' that only partly overlapped with the geographical coordinates of the peninsular district of Ennore. What was the point in living "here", Mari had asked, gesturing around him? When he showed Sriram, Murugan and me where the 'chemicals' and the 'companies' were to be found, Mari not only pointed in all cardinal directions, locating sites which I further characterize as suffused with 'toxicities', 'governmental illegalities', and regimes of fluctuating perceptibility – but he also used his entire sensorium to compellingly press his point. I characterize as Ennore's 'landscape of coal' the coal-infused, "sensuously encountered material form" (Tilley and Cameron-Daum 2017: 3) that Mari was representing to us in words and gestures. In other words, by 'landscape of coal', I designate the collection of different yet related sites where I found that coal's presence stood out the most intensely.

Thinking of my fieldsites within the umbrella term of 'landscape' is an analytical move that serves two purposes. First, it enables me to follow coal through a multisited and multiscalar approach to fieldwork. Second, it pushes me to foreground the sensorial and affective registers by which people became intimate with an environment infused in toxicities and illegalities.

Tracing coal

Throughout this thesis, the use of 'landscape' speaks of the relations between the different objects of observation that resulted from my 'multisited' (Marcus 1995, 2005) approach to fieldwork. By 'multisited' I draw attention to the ways in which my position in the field shifted as I conducted research, pushing and pulling me towards different sites of empirical observation – such that it was only later that I realized how new 'objects of observation' had caused my 'object of study' to change, a classic ethnographic process well described by Mayanthi Fernando (2014). Only through letting coal draw me to new sites (new objects of observation), did I manage to understand what my 'object of study' was:

namely, coal's intimate presence in people's lives, and the ways in which they dealt with its quotidian embrace.

Simultaneously, by gathering my sites in a landscape, I draw attention to the multiple scales that those objects of observation articulated together: from human bodies to riverbeds, from sites of political protest to sites of artisanal labour, from the construction site of a singular coal-fired power plant to the staging of a health conference addressing publics across India. Here, I draw inspiration from the "inter-scalar" approach proposed by Gabriella Hecht (2018). In following uranium-bearing rocks in Gabon, Hecht's investigation takes a plunge into atomic physics (to understand what makes mining residues and waste toxic), digs into the written records of nuclear physicists (foregrounding their personal ethical dilemmas), and traces parallel histories of government officials satisfying to the "expectations of exoticism" of their European visitors (explaining how such displays of colonial power were crucial for controversial mining projects to nevertheless move forward). Only through considering those various scales or 'scalar projects' on the same analytical plane, Hecht argues, can we make sense of how uranium-based toxicities and illegalities acquired such inescapable permanence in people's lives. This is related to the approach developed by Anna Tsing throughout her honing of multisided methodologies to consider how the "frictions" of global scales hitting ground in various localities produce "landscapes" that can be studied ethnographically (2005, 2013). In tracing coal, I encountered similarly contrasting scales, and strove to consider them together, drawing new insights from their juxtaposition.

Environment, senses, affect

Simultaneously, by thinking with the relational modalities of toxicity, illegality, and the politics of perceptibility, this thesis also contributes to a scholarship that bellies the idea that the "environment" works as an autonomous sphere, while pushing against the assumption that human beings live as enclosed "seat[s] of awareness, bounded by the skin, and set over against the world" (Ingold 2000, cited in Weston 2017:8). I found that illegalities and toxicities seeped in continuously through the human/environment 'boundary', transforming forms of materiality, bodies, and the coordinates of their encounters. In Mari's words, *even children who are not born yet, children who are still in their mother's womb, they are falling sick ... it is already inside them.* At the same time, my findings also sit uncomfortably with the more phenomenological idea of an immediate, unmediated presence to the world (e.g. Ingold 2000). Instead, I follow the idea that countless practices of 'mediation' condition

human beings' relation to the phenomena they encounter in their lives (Howes 2019, Mazzarella 2006, Keane 2005). Here, this leads me to turn my analytical gaze to the material sites where those practices make up and disrupt body/environment boundaries. Weston writes of people who are increasingly compelled in "viscerally engaging with a socially manufactured, recursively constituted 'environment' that is also, crucially, them" (2017: 7-8). As coal and its effects did through Ennore, I moved between the 'sensorial' and the 'affective' to consider how the people I met engaged with an "environment that was also them" – an engagement that results in what I term a 'landscape of coal'.

The Collins Dictionary defines a landscape as "everything you can see when you look across an area of land, including hills, rivers, buildings, trees, and plants". Extending sight to the full 'sensorium' (Howes 2019) and to the range of embodied encounters with material phenomena, a 'landscape' then appears as the result of the work people put in perceiving their surroundings through combinations of sight, hearing, taste, touch and smell – and in feeling it through visceral and cognitive engagement with the affective "traces that bodies and other forms of materiality leave upon bodies" (Weston 2017: 212).

Throughout this dissertation, I strive to use the terms 'sensorial', 'sensing' and 'perceiving' when alluding to body/environment encounters that are more explicitly mediated through the human senses (or 'sensorium'). Simultaneously, I refer to the more 'affective' modalities of body/environment encounters by using the term 'feeling' – pointing, here, to embodied, visceral relations that include but also exceed sensorial mediations, also drawing on the cognitive (thought, memory, mood) to indicate an unevenly shared 'affective' dimension. While considering that the range of embodied modalities of engagement between people and their 'environment' often straddles both the sensorial and the affective, I found that my analysis gained clarity from drawing a difference between both modalities of engagement.

This focus on the sensorial and the affective has been an important contribution of phenomenological approaches to the study of landscapes (Ingold 2000, Merleau-Ponty 1962). But as David Howes insightfully puts it, "with phenomenology, the researcher is continually at risk of projecting their own (culturally biased) subjective experience onto the culture under study without ever being the wiser, whereas the trick is to exercise one's senses critically and reflexively in an effort to make sense of how the sensorium is constructed and lived locally" (2019:23, 9) As William Mazzarella suggests, thinking with 'affect' helps us remain alert to "the uncanny fold in which inner and outer life are disjunctively blended" (2017: 199),

perhaps offering a way to offset the overly subjective quality of sensorial perceptions, drawing attention to the unevenly shared dimension of how landscapes are produced and felt. The question then becomes: how to move between the evidence of a subjective encounter with part of a landscape, to an understanding of the more diffuse ways in which that landscape is socially constructed and differentially felt? In other words, and to foreground my concern with the politics of perceptibility: how to describe a landscape made from people's fraught engagements with an unequal 'distribution of the sensible' (Rancière 2004)?

In my writing – both through the jottings taken in the spur of fieldwork, or later, as I assembled the ethnography that this thesis builds upon – I strove to convey in words the memory of my own sensing and feeling of the 'landscape of coal' I describe. At times when atmosphere, sight and hearing drew me in more intensely, I relied on film and photography to collect an archive of my fieldwork experience. I strove to access my interlocutors' experiences as well, by paying attention to how they expressed those through speech or bodily gestures. All the direct quotes in this text are drawn from my own jottings (and occasionally audio and video recordings) of my interlocutors' words. When I use indirect speech, I rephrase their words, attending to the expressivity of my own language to try and remain as close to my memory of our encounters unfolded. As Anand Pandian and Stuart McLean suggest, the craft of writing might perhaps be an attempt at "lending greater nuance and sensitivity to the project of ethnographic understanding, and thus of entering more profoundly into the lives and worlds of others" (2017: 8).

But how did I enter the lives and worlds of others? Where did this tracing of a landscape of coal begin? It is this that I turn to next.

Entering a landscape of a coal

In many ways the research presented in this thesis sprung out of me being on field, or in my case, at 'home'. Initially, I had designed my project to be an ethnographic study of TANGEDCO's 'anti-theft' squad, a team of police officers and engineers who were tasked at detecting and policing cases of electricity theft in Tamil Nadu. However, all of my attempts at getting access within TANGEDCO resulted in dead ends. It was mostly because, as one senior engineer told me, no one knew who an anthropologist was, let alone what they did[5].

[5] At the start of my fieldwork, when I was interested in studying the politics of electricity theft in Tamil Nadu, I was eventually put in touch with no one else but the director of TANGEDCO himself, who eventually agreed to meet me at his office one afternoon. Armed with a research statement and different letters of introduction, I sat at

In parallel, I had kept track of a series of news reports on a coal shortage that was playing out in Tamil Nadu at the same time (See Figure 4). What struck me almost instantly was the sheer political stir that the lack of coal in Tamil Nadu had caused. From anxieties about power cuts across homes to projected slowdowns in Tamil Nadu's manufacturing output, resulting in weeks long rounds of political mudslinging, small-scale protests and numerous court cases across India's judicial system, the lack of coal in Tamil Nadu had spiralled in directions that I simply had not expected.

Suddenly driven to know more about the status of coal in Tamil Nadu, especially given I had closely followed the central government's publicised stance about moving away from coal (see 'It is inside us' in this Introduction), I began interviewing a few industry experts I had contacted to gauge how they had understood the 'coal crisis'. Having spoken to a few lawyers, renewable energy experts and journalists, I was repeatedly asked the same question: have you seen the amount of TANGEDCO owned coal-fired thermal power plants coming up in Ennore?

In some ways, it might be appropriate to say my tracing of this landscape of coal began there. It prompted me to get in touch with Sriram, given I was told that the small

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the reception room of the TANGEDCO head office, waiting my turn to meet the director in person. A junior clerk walked in and called out my name after an hours' wait, and I responded excitedly, envisioning the immanent commencement of my fieldwork. Sitting behind a large desk, his eyes fixed on the Tamil news channel that played on a television set to one corner of the room, the director asked if any of my research would be published in the "mainstream media". When I responded that it wouldn't, the director called his secretary in and asked that I be given access to the Vigilance Department to grant be access, as my request appeared genuinely academic in nature. Elated, I was next introduced to the head of Vigilance, a police officer in charge of the 'Anti Power Theft Squads' that were tasked to combat electricity theft in Tamil Nadu. Sitting in another reception room in the same office, I was asked to write my name, address, and purpose of visit on a slip of paper before meeting the officer. Eventually I was called in and this time the head of the department stared me down and expressed her inability to understand my request.

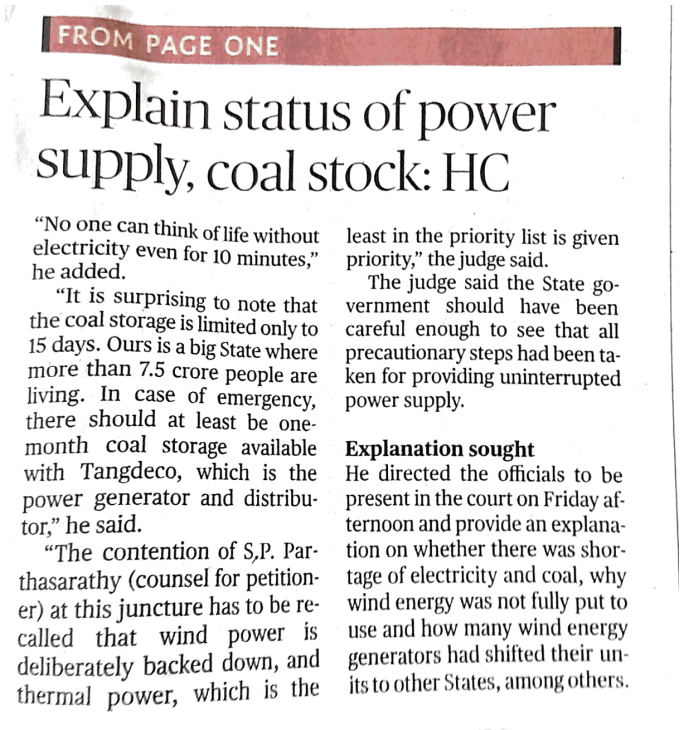
"It is for my PhD thesis… the Director has okayed this request. He mentioned this would only be a formality." She smiled at me and insisted that it would eventually be her decision as it was after all her department I'd be working with. She'd have a chat with the director and get back to me, she said, shuffling the papers on her desk to suggest it was time for me to leave.

The following day, as I sat nervously at home anticipating some form of a roadblock, I received a phone call from an unknown number. The person on the line told me he was from TANGEDCO and was in the lane right next to my house. The head of Vigilance had sent him to speak to me, he said, about my project. I knew they had my details as I'd written them down on the piece of paper before meeting the head of department, but I was still surprised. I guided him over the phone to my house and was even more surprised to see two men, one clearly a police officer and another possibly a TANGEDCO employee. The police officer introduced himself, shaking my hand with sufficient strength, and explained that his colleague was a senior engineer at TANGEDCO.

"We came as the head of vigilance asked us to meet you personally… to tell you that your research will not be possible. You see… our work… especially the vigilance team… can become dangerous. Only two months ago someone died in an accident. It is risky and if anything happens to you… we'll only be in trouble."

I nodded. I told him I understood. He offered that I speak to the engineer and ask him what I'd like to know for my research, reducing the entirety of my fieldwork to a ten minute meeting in my house, before they themselves cut it short, insisting they had to leave. And that was as close I got to studying TANGEDCO on the inside.

environmental organisation he was a part of was active in Ennore. The organisation, funded by many of their well-wishers, worked with fishers and other residents of Ennore to record and counter TANGEDCO (and other industries) sponsored environmental violations. My initial interactions with Sriram and his colleagues grew into a considerable friendship whereby I was allowed to follow the work they did very closely. This relationship not only took me to Ennore on many occasions, thereby allowing me to build my own friendships with many of Ennore's residents, but also gave me access to important government documents about the power plants, which I will discuss in more depth very soon. In many ways, it is through Sriram and his organisation that I got to know Ennore better, thereafter, allowing me many visits on my own.



FROM PAGE ONE

Explain status of power supply, coal stock: HC

"No one can think of life without electricity even for 10 minutes," he added.

"It is surprising to note that the coal storage is limited only to 15 days. Ours is a big State where more than 7.5 crore people are living. In case of emergency, there should at least be one-month coal storage available with Tangdeco, which is the power generator and distributor," he said.

"The contention of S.P. Parthasarathy (counsel for petitioner) at this juncture has to be recalled that wind power is deliberately backed down, and thermal power, which is the least in the priority list is given priority," the judge said.

The judge said the State government should have been careful enough to see that all precautionary steps had been taken for providing uninterrupted power supply.

Explanation sought

He directed the officials to be present in the court on Friday afternoon and provide an explanation on whether there was shortage of electricity and coal, why wind energy was not fully put to use and how many wind energy generators had shifted their units to other States, among others.

Figure 4. A newspaper clipping I had filed at the time of media coverage of a 'coal crisis' in Tamil Nadu.

I got to meet and later know many fishers in Ennore, especially those from Kuppam, a small fishing hamlet that was relocated for the construction of the NCTPS. In Kuppam, I built a closer relationship with Velu, Surya and Pandian (whom we meet in Chapter 1 and 2) than many others. I got to observe the fishermen's encounters with the shifting landscape in which they practiced their *thozil* – a term that can translate as 'labour', while designating the practice of artisanal work, and in this case, fishing. By participating in a few fishing expeditions, I refined the scale of my observation by focusing on the physical and embodied

qualities of the fishermen's *thozil*, studying the ways by which the fishermen made sensorial and affective sense of the toxicities and illegalities that flooded Ennore. My interactions with Kuppam's fishers spanned the entire length of my field work (from September 2018 to October 2019), beginning with three to four visits a week to once every three weeks towards the last few months.

Simultaneously, it was also through Sriram, in our first ever meeting, that I got the contact of Sundaram, a charismatic working committee member from the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) who was actively involved in Ennore's labour politics. Sriram had himself only met Sundaram once before. After my first meeting with Sundaram, he allowed me to accompany him as he moved from the construction site of the new SEZ power plant (Chapter 3 and 4) to the Labour Commissionerate Office in the centre of Chennai, thereafter giving me the chance to follow heated negotiations between workers, subcontractors and TANGEDCO officials over the course of the year. While this sometimes involved calling Sundaram twice a week to follow up on specific cases or incidents, he would also often call me to come meet him, join a protest or witness a negotiation, which made certain aspects of studying with Sundaram relatively easy.

Through the course of my fieldwork, having also built a working relationship with a small team of health activists associated with Sriram's organisation, I got to know more about Seppakkam, the village nested against the ash pond upon which the new SEZ plant was being built. I observed residents' forceful bodily engagements with the toxicities that emerged from the combustion and circulation of coal, and the activists' attempts at making perceptible the forms of embodied harm wrought on people living in toxic environments (Chapter 5). I followed this team's efforts for the duration of my fieldwork, participating in any way that was needed of me, including photography and film work.

In addition, and as briefly mentioned above, I insist that this landscape of coal I began tracing also included paper and digital documents – such as the controversial Environmental Impact Assessment Reports (EIA) that authorize the construction of the power plants, the texts of various labour and environmental laws, or the various reports, pamphlets or posts on social networking websites (like Facebook) produced by various groups within and beyond Ennore. Since those documents were highly effective in securing or contesting coal's presence, circulation, and perceptibility, I consider my engagement with them as an important method by which I dug deeper into my fieldwork.

Lastly, as I found myself studying more and more documents and meeting more and more people during my fieldwork, my contacts snowballed, demanding that I crisscross across Chennai, Ennore and Tamil Nadu, stopping wherever and whenever coal's presence stood out more acutely as time went on. To keep track of some of this movement, I was aided by recordings I made of over twenty structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews I conducted with journalists, activists, government officials, TANGEDCO engineers, residents in Ennore and many others, all helping me sharpen my understanding of this landscape of coal.

Stories of where I speak from

While I grew up in Chennai, the same city as most of my interlocutors, to simply call myself a 'native anthropologist' or someone who studied my own 'home' (Narayan 1993) would not do justice to the position I held as a researcher in the landscape of coal I have described. I could not, in any clear-cut way, consistently mark out the spatial boundaries that separated my field site from my home (Anand 2017, Ferguson and Gupta 1997) but ever so often, there were conflictual, celebratory and humorous moments that laid bare the position I held as an upper caste male researcher who grew up in an affluent coastal neighbourhood in the south of Chennai. For example, Vijay, a fisherman from Ennore, and I, a person who lived thirty kilometres south of Ennore, bonded on the fact that we shared the same coastline. He knew the part of the city where I came from and even told me that he had relatives who lived in the fishing hamlet near my neighbourhood. There was a direct bus that one could take from Ennore to my neighbourhood, and we laughed about how long the bus took during peak hours, both of us preferring the suburban train instead. "But the air is so different in your area", Vijay told me. "It does not smell bad there."

With that statement, Vijay had made it clear how different our lives simultaneously were. Yes, there were shared experiences that drew us together like the Tsunami in 2004 and the excitement of the cricket match from earlier that week, but there were socio-economic and caste differences that very evidently separated our lives in parallel. I did not grow up smelling what he smelt every day and as he also pointed out, I got to access a life – from studying in a private English language school to living in cities across the country and abroad – that he sometimes wished he'd had. Similarly, Vijay readily made assumption about my caste status, guessing from my surname that I held Brahmin heritage. He made this

assumption clear when he pointedly implied that I, unlike him, must be following a vegetarian diet: “Without non-veg, I don’t think I can live. I don’t know how you do it.”

Often, people insisted I was from somewhere else altogether. Sundaram, the trade union leader whom we extensively meet in this thesis, often told people I was “from London” despite my hurried interventions to tell whomever he was speaking to that I was actually from Chennai. Another time, a power plant engineer told his colleague I was Tamil but “from the United States” and I again intervened to correct him: “So, you speak Tamil?”, he asked. Yes, I told him, and he revealed his surprise as to why I had chosen to speak to him in English in the first place.

My experience of studying in this landscape of coal was riddled with moments that bounded me to my field site as someone who was always already on the inside, and other situations where I was marked as someone who came from somewhere else. Throughout this thesis, I strive to lay bare the moments that questioned or cemented who I was, where I came from, and why I was where I was. While my answer was often consistent – “I’m Rishabh. I am from Chennai but now I am doing my PhD in the United Kingdom. My research is about coal in Tamil Nadu and that is why I’m here” – it was received in many different ways. Thus, in making clear where it is that I speak from in the chapters in this thesis, those moments of cohesion and separation are what I pull to the fore. In short, I follow Kath Weston’s (2010:16) suggestion that “stories” are perhaps better tools than “intersections” for unravelling the “gut wrenching feeling that ushers in conflicts of identity”. Those stories tell you where it is that I speak from.

Structure of the thesis

This thesis is organized in three parts, each foregrounding a theme, in a narrative ploy to trace coal’s intermixing with lives and livelihoods in Ennore’s landscape of coal.

Part 1 takes place in Kuppam, a fishing village that had been relocated across the Ennore estuary for the construction of the NCTPS, in 1994. From Kuppam’s new location, the power plant could still be seen, heard and smelt puncturing the sky. Part 1 takes for its theme the labour of artisanal fishing, as the fishermen referred to it in Tamil: *thozil* (tho-lil). The two chapters that make up this part are spent with fishermen Velu, Pandian and Surya as I follow their practice of, and reflection on, their disrupted *thozil*, in a landscape that was

itself undergoing brutal changes. In effect, both chapters develop from the same question: how is the embodied, skilled labour of fishing made sense of by those who continue practicing it, even after toxic refuse has reduced estuarine rivers to the dump sites of coal-fired thermal power plants?

Chapter 1 stays close to accounts that I collected from fishermen, which all spoke of a very specific "feeling" associated to the power plants' relentless progression in the landscape, eating into the creek, the estuary and the wetlands that once surrounded their homes. This was a feeling of being stuck in place while everything around them was, simultaneously, in brutal, nauseating flux. It manifested habitually during the practice of *thozil* and uncovered some of the bodily intimacies that the fishermen developed with the coal-based toxicities that swarmed Ennore.

In Chapter 2, I change perspective on the links between the embodied labour of *thozil* as it was still practiced by the fishermen, and the forms of mediation they had to perform, to foreground the wider field of labour relations in which *thozil* had become inserted. The expansion of the power plants, as I have mentioned in the introduction, not only swarmed their landscape with multiple chemical 'toxicities', but also brought with a host of 'governmental illegalities', and this is the analytical shift that marks this chapter as different from the previous one.

The theme of Part 2 is a set of phenomena that were termed *piraccanai* (meaning problem, or trouble) by a charismatic union leader whom I call Sundaram. From the vantage point of Sundaram, and that of the workers he sought to represent, I explore the 'trouble' that came to characterize labour relations after the introduction and operation of Ennore's power plants. Chapters 3 and 4 both ask: how was *piraccanai* – as the convergence of a density of illegalities, fraught labour relations, and perilous relations to the government – dealt with, by those whose livelihoods were fuelled by coal's economies?

To address this question, In Chapter 3, I write about the ways in which Sundaram navigated Ennore's landscape of coal, mapping out trouble while deploying his own acts of *piraccannai* in his own bids to further the workers' struggle. I show how the government's constant involvement in the density of illegalities that floated around Ennore's labour markets and relations opened up to liminal spaces for tactical prowess, especially for those, like Sundaram, who knew how to mediate *piraccanai*.

In Chapter 4, I continue writing about Sundaram but shift focus to the 'limit' of *piracannai* he told me needed to be engaged with if his demands for the protection and regularisation of Ennore's precarious workers were to be heard, let alone met. In exploring how and when this supposed 'limit' was crossed at two union events that he had organised in Ennore, I also bring to the fore the unexpected and perilous ways the limit was arbitrarily, and somewhat abruptly, marked by the government. In other words, I show how this landscape of coal was selectively shielded from forms of dissent, by the government.

Part 3 explores the thematic of 'proof', showing how *proof* can sometimes come to weigh more than presence itself in Ennore's landscape of coal. This part consists of a single and final chapter taking us to Seppakkam, a village nestled on the lip of the ash pond that Mari pointed at, in the very start of this introduction.

In Chapter 5, I follow health activist Ramya, and her collaboration with some of the residents of Seppakkam. I unravel the ways in which many attempted to make Seppakkam perceptible to TANGEDCO and the government. While the need to make Seppakkam perceptible developed from the governmental practices that rendered the village non-existent in the power plants planning documents – a grotesque violation of India's environmental legislation – the politics of making the village perceptible also came with its own tensions.

I use the conclusion to this thesis as a space of inquiry. I broaden the contextual framing of my project, by questioning recent global developments that attested to the continued circulation and utilisation of coal in India and beyond. How can my research be helpful in comprehending and analysing what the future of coal holds for the world? What can the stories from Ennore tell us about a coal-infused future? By recounting five ethnographical stories of coal-related 'growth', I reiterate a line of thought that traverses the length and breadth of this thesis: that those who lived in the visceral embrace of coal knew only too well that coal, as much as its contested future, was there to stay.

Part 1. *Thozil* (tho-lil)

The following two chapters (1 & 2) are intricately linked and thus can be read together. They are linked in that both chapters develop from my fieldwork in Kuppam, a small fishing village in Ennore that was relocated for the construction of the NCTPS in 1994. But more importantly, both chapters identify the fishermen's *thozil* (their practice of artisanal estuarine fishing) as central to their respective arguments. However, a shift in analytical gaze separates both chapters and I briefly lay them out here.

The first chapter investigates a pervasive "feeling" of fixity and stagnation that Kuppam's fishermen identified as symbolising what it meant to live and fish by the power plants. Their *thozil*, as the chapter goes on to show, became an important site wherein that "feeling" found habitual manifestation. Thus, in the first chapter, *thozil* is examined as an act of embodied labour wherein the fishermen made sensorial and temporal contact with their shifting landscape and expands on how it was that this interaction allowed for that "feeling" to emerge amongst the fishermen.

In the second chapter, I examine how the practice of *thozil* forwarded another awkward conundrum amongst the fishermen. The practice of estuarine fishing in a heavily industrialised Ennore, as the chapter will show, simultaneously reinforced and diluted the fishermen's ability to identify as 'fishermen'. For this, the scale of analysis shifts from examining *thozil* solely as a site of bodily labour to *thozil* as a form of embodied labour within the Ennore's changing labour relations.

Both chapters, essentially, develop from asking the fishermen what it meant to live and fish amidst Ennore's power plants and crucially show how various chemical toxicities and harmful governmental practices intersected with the fishermen's labouring bodies.

Figure 5. Standing at the edge of his boat, Velu, a fisherman from Kuppam, motored his way through the river, passing the newly built bridge and transmission towers. He was on his way to practice his thozil: the artisanal practice of estuarine fishing in Ennore

Chapter 1: Feeling Fixations and Change

"Used to it now"

The fishermen seated in the net mending area of Kuppam knew why I was there. They watched me approach them from the narrow road that led up to the cement shack, some of them keeping a keen eye on me as they wobbled in fervid laughter – for the game of cards that they were pursuing had abruptly marked the winners and losers of the round. As I inched closer to the group, Simbu, a fisherman in his mid-thirties, asked me bluntly:

"What do you want to go out there for?"

Taken aback, I responded nervously. I told him that it was important for me to 'see' the *thozil* [work, labour] that the other fishermen and him often spoke to me about, adding that there was no other way I would 'understand'. But he had decided to ignore what I said, altogether. Instead, flicking all his cards away and cussing loudly in disappointment, Simbu riled up the amusement of the others seated around him, displaying his indifference to me having been there. Embarrassed, I quickly started looking for Velu – the person I was to accompany fishing that evening – in a bid to escape Simbu's silent tirade before it got any worse. As I hurriedly made my way towards the docked boats, an older fisherman nudged me on the shoulder and warned me that the river would be swarming with mosquitoes at night. It was not too late for me to change my mind, he went on to insist. I repeated myself to him: "I won't understand what it means to live and fish by the thermal power plants if I don't go out there with them". Bullish mosquitoes, I thought to myself, I was more than prepared for them.

> "But you will go out there and then you will simply leave. Later you might even make a name for yourself. But where will we go?"

Looking back, I traced the angry voice that had posed the question to a young fisherman standing in the corner. Immediately, he followed:

> "We'll still be here only. Right? Surrounded by all these *companies* [in English]. By all these power plants."

I suddenly felt ashamed of the way in which I had acted, pushing out my determination in such pressing terms. The young man, however, seemed to have sensed my defeat quickly. After a brief rhetorical pause, Selva – as the young fisherman would later introduce himself to me –, simply added:

> "But what to do? Our lives will keep going on like this. That's what I feel [*teriyarthu*]. But leave that. We have gotten used to it being like this."

Following a feeling

Selva had used the Tamil word *teriyarthu* to describe his awareness of a life set to remain 'like this'. *Teriyarthu* can translate to 'knowing', but also points at a more embodied notion of comprehending, 'sensing', or 'feeling', which is the nuance I want to foreground here. On previous occasions, other fishermen had told me about similarly inescapable and ubiquitous 'feelings', that they all habitually lived with. In those instances, they had used a range of Tamil expressions – *unarkiren* [sensing], *nanarkiren* [thinking] and *yosikiren* [imagining] – which I choose to all translate as 'feeling', as they straddled the sensorial and the cognitive, while pointing at shared affective states and moods. Those feelings often seemed to draw on impressions that were 'inside' the fishermen, on 'thoughts' that they just could not fully explain, on something they 'knew' that troubled them deeply. At other times they appeared to stem from sensorial perceptions which the fishermen could pinpoint to more clearly. As, for instance, when I had asked Pandian, the headman of Kuppam, about the 'bad smell' he had spoken about at a public meeting in Ennore:

> "Come to my house and smell what I smell", he had said when I asked to know more, even pretending to spit on the ground as to emphasise his statement. "It stinks… like nothing you've smelt before! Then you will understand."

And to Pandian's house in Kuppam I had gone, armed with more questions about that appalling smell. The stench constantly reminded him, Pandian had told me, sitting in the living room of his house, about his nagging regret for having accepted the Tamil Nadu government's offer to relocate Kuppam for the construction of the NCTPS. Every day, he continued, that smell troubled him. In other words, Pandian's statements had also echoed Selva's claim that the fishermen were somehow fixed in their landscape:

> "More *companies* [in English] are coming here", Pandian added. "A lot is changing here. But for us, I can tell you, nothing is changing. We all feel [*teriyarthu*] that."

This chapter begins by unpacking an uncomfortable juxtaposition: while the fishermen lamented a life in which 'nothing [was] changing' for them, they simultaneously asserted that they were experiencing considerable change on a daily basis. In other words, their accounts of their lives in Kuppam – their failed explanations, troubling thoughts, resurging memories, and nagging sensations – expressed a 'feeling' of both temporal fixity and tremendous

material flux. Their expression of this feeling, I show throughout this chapter, was related to their experiences of the power plants introduction in Ennore, the pollution that was wrought by the power-plants' operation, and the ways in which the resultant toxic refuse seeped through air, land and water. Crucially, a lot of those toxic substances further seeped through the fishermen's own bodies, in ways that increased the sensorial dimension of this ambivalent feeling, which they claimed they habitually held.

Here, it is worth noting that I use the term 'fishermen' for two reason. The first being that my fieldwork was limited to interactions with male fishers in Kuppam and the term is intended to reflect on the gendered connotations of this research. Second, the term is also tied to the practice of *thozil* given that it was primarily male fishers who set out to fish. While my interactions with the fisherwomen of Kuppam were restricted, I knew some of the older women took on the task of selling smaller catches in the local market.[6] Some of the younger women, I was told, had taken up jobs in the 'companies' surrounding Ennore or even in Chennai. Lastly, whenever applicable, I do use the term 'fishers' to speak of the larger fishing community and signal it within direct quotations when the term was used by either fishermen, fisherwomen or fisher children.

Moving forward, this chapter goes on to trace this 'feeling' more closely, locating the sites in which it stood out most strikingly. Based on the fishermen's accounts, I argue that it was during their physical and sensorial practice of artisanal estuarine fishing – what they called their *thozil* – that this 'feeling' arose most routinely and strongly. I use the Tamil word *thozil* (tho-lil) in this thesis as it encompasses the terms 'profession' and 'labour' within its fold. Whenever the fishermen used the word *thozil,* they would conjointly speak of their profession as artisanal fishers and the physical labour that went into the practice of fishing, and it is this reason I continue using the term over 'profession' or 'labour'. Much literature has intricately described "taskscapes" (Ingold 2000) in and with which people work, showing how the practice of skilled, embodied labour thins out the boundary between people and their 'environment'. While this chapter contributes to this scholarship, it goes on to ask what happens when such skilled labour unfolds in a place undergoing brutal material flux – in a landscape transforming by the steady and seeping in of toxic substances, and pilling up of the

[6] Ajanta Subramanian (2009) writes about a similar gendered separation of labour in her work with the Mukkuvars of southern Tamil Nadu. While the fishermen usually went out to sea and fished, restricting the labour of fishing to male members of their communities, fisherwomen took on the labour of selling some of the catch in local markets.

infrastructures that produce them and put them in circulation. Thus, in this chapter, I describe *thozil* as a site wherein the fishermen entered in toxic intimacy with the coal that had insinuated its way into their lives. This was evidenced by the forms of "embodied measurements" they made of their changing landscape (Weston 2017), and by the ways in which they grappled with the myriad times (Cons 2020, Bear 2014) that patterned those changes.

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I have split this chapter into three sections to help me trace the 'feeling' of both fixity and change which permeated accounts of fishermen's lives in Kuppam. I begin by providing an account of a discussion I had with Pandian, the headman of Kuppam. As previously stated, having met him at a community meeting that was organised by an Ennore-based non-governmental organisation, I was particularly intrigued by Pandian's speech about a "bad smell" that plagued Kuppam. When I met him, Pandian not only explained *why* that bad smell had invaded Kuppam – and *why* he held the government responsible for the toxic pollutions that swarmed his landscape –, but also detailed *how* it was that he, and many other fishermen, shared that 'feeling' of simultaneous fixity and change.

In the following section, leading from Pandian's insistence on *how* the fishermen felt fixed in their changing landscape, I focus on the bodily evidence that the fishermen held about the different toxic substances that floated in Ennore. In 2017, after a container ship spilt oil into the Bay of Bengal, just off the Kamarajar Port in Ennore, the estuary was subject to a series of scientific studies that tested the hydrological system's resultant rate of oil-based bioaccumulation. Having not been consulted, Kuppam's fishermen expressed their frustrations with what was being reported – for example, that the fish in the estuary was no longer fit for consumption. Unlike the scientists, the fishermen, had to immerse themselves entirely in the water as the only means by which they could earn an income. And by doing so, many of them insisted, the bodily demands of their *thozil* simultaneously informed them about what was in the water, and about the speed and pace at which things were changing.

In the final section I foreground the link between *thozil* and temporal change. I show how the fishermen encountered a myriad times in their daily lives, as I describe their persistent practice of traditional estuarine fishing, in a landscape undergoing massive transformation and disruptions. Drawing on my experience of watching Velu fish in the river, I argue that the overwhelming presence of the power plants – of the industrial sounds, sights

and smells – simultaneously invoked vivid memories of the past and amplified anxieties about the future. It troubled Velu. It troubled him because he felt this "all the time".

'They cheated us'

A retired TANGEDCO employee, Pandian had to be woken up the afternoon I got to his house. He had had a few drinks earlier in the day and I could smell the alcohol off his breath – leaving me unsure as to whether it was well-suited for me to continue with our meeting. But he was happy to see me, and moreover, particularly pleased that I had shown interest in his speech from the previous day. He was glad I came, he insisted, seating me down in his living room, agreeing for me to record our conversation as he attempted to beat the grogginess that was otherwise weighing him down. Pressing his forehead, he began:

> "Everyone is a fisherman here, you see. Six villages in total. We share the river but we all also share that smell I spoke about yesterday. You can smell it right?

Without further initiation, Pandian broke into a longer monologue. A burly man with a flair for narration, gesticulating select sequences with great vigour whenever he deemed it necessary, Pandian insisted that the smell he spoke of emblemised the fisherman's "plight", pressing his nostrils tight to confirm that it needed shutting out. That smell – the putrid intermixing of coal dust, fly ash and other power plant emissions – was a daily reminder of how the government had "cheated" his community. All that mattered to the government, Pandian made vehemently clear, were the economies that were built around the thermal power plants, adding that the fishers of Kuppam were rendered disposable for the purpose.

> "They took our land and said you will benefit from development. It'll be good for the area… nothing like that has happened. We're stuck here with this smell. That is all."

While the olfactory sensation of smelling the power plant's toxic refuse affected Pandian, troubling him on a daily basis, he told me there were certain other things I would not understand because I wasn't a fisherman.

"Like what?", I asked.

"Like money", he said.

Pandian broke down the expenses of their *thozil* for me thereafter. He explained that it cost them nearly 200000 Indian Rupees (INR)[7] to buy a boat and the appropriate nets for

[7] Approximately US $2700.

fishing in the river. People formed various coalitions keeping this in mind – between boat owners, net owners and those who offered only labour – splitting the expenditure and profit equitably. For example, if it costed them 500 INR for diesel and ice (to store the catch) and the catch was sold for 3500 INR, then 3000 INR was split between the owner of the boat, the owner of the nets and whoever else was on board. If the boat owners or net owners also worked the shift, they got two shares of the profit. During the right season, the fishermen could make up to 10000 INR (approximately US$ 135) on any given day. As the season got leaner in the summer, fewer boats ventured out in the river as the catch remained low and the labour put in more cumbersome.

"Did anyone go to sea?", I asked Pandian.

Very few, he said. Though the fishermen from Kuppam could fish at sea, Pandian insisted that they hardly ever did. The expenses were greater, the equipment was different and maritime *thozil* involved more than one person at a time. Estuarine *thozil* on the contrary was feasible even if one went unaccompanied. Nonetheless, the fishing grounds, both sea and estuary, were shared amongst the villages under a complex system. During the monsoons, when the tides were extremely rough and the prospect of marine fishing too dangerous, the maritime fishers from the two seaside villages were granted access to the river. This was done to alleviate past tensions that pitted communities against each other, sometimes resulting in violent conflicts that disrupted fishing activities altogether. "It works better now", Pandian confirmed. The remaining four villages, including Kuppam, were primarily estuarine fishing villages that shared the river more intimately. Two villages amongst the four were home to small net fishers who primarily fished by the shore of the river. They did not share the same fishing grounds as the rest. Kuppam and the other village, however, practiced the same estuarine *thozil*. Further, they fished on alternate days to avoid any sort of conflict. As Pandian said:

> "We fish on one day and they [the other village] fish on the other day. Only both our villages have the right to catch prawns in the river. Before we used to work on the same day but that was a real headache. We fought a lot. It was my father who said we should work on different days and sought the agreement between us. He didn't want us to fight… now they go one night, and we go the other."

Additionally, both villages also developed a system of fishing that portioned the river into equitable sections such that everyone had rotational access to all of the divided fishing grounds. Velu explained this to me with a simple example one evening. He asked me to think of the river as a twenty kilometre stretch that was divided into twenty different units. If they

worked the first unit one night, with each unit being worked by other fishermen from Kuppam the same night, they would work the second unit the next trip and move through the units with each consecutive shift. This rotation policy ensured everyone worked throughout the permissible range of the river and guaranteed some sense of equity. For Pandian, the system also ensured that there was less squabble amongst Kuppam's fishermen.[8] There were tense days in the past, he insisted, he wished he could "forget". People fought all the time and the situation within and beyond the villages was often rife with conflict. However, all that had changed. Now there were other things that amplified the fisher's frustrations. As he put it bluntly:

"TANGEDCO has taken everything away from us. That is the problem."

The power plants, Pandian angrily clarified, made his "blood boil". He recounted how it was his decision to accept the government's relocation offers, assuming that it would provide stable income and adequate employment opportunities for Kuppam's families. All it proved to be was a costly mistake. Jobs were deliberately allocated in distant parts of the city, sometimes even in other districts in Tamil Nadu, especially when the fishers protested the calamitous effects that the power plants had caused in their landscape. Moreover, their relationship with the river, creek and estuary had dramatically transformed. Critical of the stress that the estuary and river had undergone with the operation of the power plants, Pandian was adamant that the government just could not "see" like they did. The silting of the river mouth had hampered the tidal stimuli of the creek, depleting available catch, considerably altering the depth of the river in the process. Simultaneously, the discharge of the water that was used to cool the power plants only increased the temperature of the estuary, thereby making entry into the river an impossible task on certain occasions.

"How can we practice our *thozil* if our bodies cannot enter the river", Pandian asked?

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[8] Scholars (Panini 2001, Mathew 1991) writing about the *padu* system that governed the fishing practices of villages by the Pulicat Lake have suggested that the system not only ensured rotational and equitable access to fishing grounds but also doubled up as a regulatory and resolutory system that defined appropriate fishing practices and offered counsel for mitigating conflicts. The Pulicat Lake — the second largest brackish water lake in India — is connected to the Ennore Creek by the same river that the fishers of Kuppam rely on. This tidally influenced link is crucial for the brackish water system as it ensures that the lake meets the sea through the river and has also been a source of linkage between the fishers of Ennore and the fishers of Pulicat. Pandian, or any other fisher from Kuppam for that matter, never used the term *padu*. But the geographic proximity coupled with certain caste affinities (marriage between villages in Pulicat and Ennore weren't uncommon) allows me to suggest that at the very least, both systems were not dissimilar.

Moreover, when it was the case ten years ago that forty boats could enter the river to fish at any given time, now it was only possible for fifteen or twenty boats to work an entire shift. And that was on a good day, Pandian claimed. It was unfeasible for more people to fish in tandem as the returns were low and the workload extremely high.

> "Only 20 boats!", Pandian exclaimed a second time. "Only half.... In Neyveli also they [the government] cheated people like this. In Kanyakumari and Rameshwaram also they said we will be building something here and you will all get jobs. They said go see how well off the people in Ennore are. Two buses came from there. They asked me what they should do. I said beat them [TANGEDCO officials] up and send them away. They will ruin everything and leave you nothing … That was my inheritance [pointing at the NCTPS]. My father's wealth. I gave it away. I vacated it. My father was born there. He grew up there. So did I. On that soil. You understand? That is how much anger I have."[9]

Having grown increasingly distressed as he continued speaking, Pandian at one point had to calm himself down. Deciding to show me his ancestral land, he invited me to the terrace of his house and told me, as we walked up the flight of stairs, to take a look at my feet once we would have re-entered the house.

> "They will be fully black", he confidently proclaimed, chuckling in some sort of tempered amusement.

And, they most certainly were. Caked in coal dust, the bottoms of my feet felt the granular contours of an unwelcome layer. My body prompted me to respond to it and I wiped my feet on the plastic floor mat that strategically stood by the entrance of the terrace. The sensation of something unpleasant was powerful; especially with the inordinate sight of the thermal power plants towering over us on either side of the river. As I stood on Pandian's terrace trying to think of a landscape that once existed without the power plants, trying to imagine what it must mean to have a massive coal-fired thermal power plant stand on your ancestral land, I found it hard to think past the sights, sounds and smells that struck me from every corner of his terrace. The government had cheated them, the 'feeling' of it had grown in me too.

When I told Pandian this, he found it rather amusing, sniggering indiscreetly in response. I remember immediately asking myself if I had said something silly. Was it even possible for me to know that 'feeling'? But, as we headed back downstairs, Pandian suddenly

[9] Neyvelli, Kanyakumari and Rameshwaram are three different coastal towns in the south of Tamil Nadu.

expressed some muted delight in my claim that I had somewhat understood what he was trying to tell me.

> "But wait till you see our *thozil"*, he added. "Then you will understand what I'm saying even better."

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Pandian's accusations that government had "cheated" the fishers of Kuppam highlighted the deep mistrust he held for TANGEDCO. TANGEDCO had acquired Pandian's ancestral lands and relocated the fishers of Kuppam, offering the first two male members of each relocated family jobs with the company in compensation. While at that time Pandian thought the decision to accept the government's offer would bring greater socioeconomic mobility amongst the fishers, it simultaneously accelerated the amount of stress Ennore's hydrological ecosystems came under, drastically altering his landscape and leaving those without compensation jobs the prospect of fishing in a polluted river. Moreover, one power plant paved the way for more power plants and other 'companies', significantly increasing the amounts of toxic refuse that was being dumped in Kuppam often in violation of environmental regulation (See Introduction), compounding 'bad smells' over 'bad smells' in his home.

While I grasped this strand of thought, as Pandian let loose his anger at the government and its responsibility towards the fishermen's plight, what struck me later on as I relistened to the recordings of our conversation was that he had shifted registers along the way. My initial question, asking him *why* it was that he named a "cheating" government as responsible for the stench that surrounded his house, had transformed into a conversation about the 'feeling' that lurked in him and *how* it was that he sensorially and cognitively felt it.

A lot of that 'feeling', as some of what I have quoted at length has shown, was related to the ways in which he had measured his shifting landscape with the technical and embodied experiences of his *thozil*. Twenty boats entering the river as opposed to forty, such a calculation provided a measure of the socio-economic changes that were inflicted on the lives and livelihoods of Kuppam's fishers after the introduction of the power plants. Similarly, coming back with a catch that fetched them 5000 INR during the fishing season, as opposed to the customary figure of 10000 INR, was evidence of how the river had eroded in prawn and shrimp supply after more power plants began operations. These technical calculations

were coupled with other bodily and sensorial measurements – like recognising the changing thermal properties of the river when swimming in it, or even smelling the power plant's toxic emissions cloud Kuppam on a daily basis – evidencing a landscape that was experiencing consistent socio-natural shifts. Moreover, over the last two decades, as the power plants only grew in number, flooding the river with more coal ash, blanketing the air with more coal dust, he had stayed put in Kuppam the entire time, knowing nowhere else to go. He made it clear to me that while the toxic smells that arose with the power plant's emissions stroked up many feelings that troubled him, the sight of the power plant on his father's land only furthered the contempt he held for the government. Kuppam was his "home", all he could do was continue fishing in the creek as he had always done, 'feeling' like despite the fact he was earning a pension with his retirement, money he would "readily give up" if he could go back in time, "nothing was bound to change" for him.

But wait till you see our thozil, then you will understand what I'm saying even better.

A few days later, when I got to Kuppam – to encounter the embarrassment of Simbu's coldness, and later face Selva's sharp criticism about my privileged determination – I was there to accompany Velu with his *thozil* in hope of understanding that 'feeling' better. That day, while it was my ability to leave Kuppam at will and "make a name for myself" somewhere else which triggered Selva into expressing that 'feeling' he had 'gotten used to', his comments were simultaneously founded on the awkward notion that my body was significantly more fragile than his. That same day, in fact, Selva had humorously warned me that if I wished to escape Velu's infamous loquaciousness when I was stuck on the boat with him at night, I would have no other choice but to swim in a polluted river to get back home. When I responded that I knew how to swim and was even prepared to if the need arose, Selva grew considerably stern.

"Don't swim man!", he stressed loudly. "Your body can't handle it."

"Why not?", I asked.

"You're not used to the polluted water. You're not a fisherman."

Toxic fish and embodied measurers

In January 2017, an accident between two oil tankers, just outside the Kamarajar Port in Ennore, had resulted in a calamitous oil spill. Estimates increased from a modest 200 litres of spilt oil, one day after the incident, to about 40 tonnes of crude oil a week into clean-up

efforts. Environmental activists, from the day of the spill, had pushed the government to begin working on long-term solutions, arguing that a spill of that magnitude was bound to have extreme ecological impacts. Just clearing up the oil that was on the surface of the sea and discarding the coagulated blobs of black fuel that washed ashore multiple city beaches was not going to be enough. Fishers, parallelly, also rallied against the government for monetary compensation. The spill had hampered their *thozil* by impeding their access to the sea and estuary. Moreover, with reports of toxic fish having made the rounds, their catch had largely gone unsold. If there was no market for their fish, what were they to do? However, a week into clean-up efforts, the government released a statement with assurances that their own tests had declared that the environmental damage was negligible and that the fish was safe to consume. Simultaneously, they guaranteed the fishers that compensation claims would be looked into at the earliest.

Eleven months after the spill, with requests for additional compensation having become a contested matter at the state High Court, a report filed by the Directorate General of Shipping claimed that the total amount of oil that was spilt was in fact nearly 250 tonnes (Thirumurthy 2017). Adding that "human error" and "fatigue" were identified as the reasons behind the collision, the report further stated that the Kamarajar Port's disaster contingency plans were left largely under-developed (Ibid.). The oil-spill warranted an urgent mitigatory response and the port was ill-equipped in this regard. Though the activists expressed their displeasure with the report's delayed publication, the findings not only confirmed that the government had released severely deflated estimates in respect to the amount of oil that was spilt, but also supported numerous accusations that the government had deliberately dealt with misinformation in an attempt to conceal their own inefficacy at managing the disaster.

The government, thereby, had purposefully tweaked numbers and results in an effort to obfuscate the amount and concentration of toxic substances that had been spilt into Ennore. Moreover, as there were no prior studies of the region that was available, activists also alleged that an accurate measure of the effects that the oil spill had on an already strained hydrological system would only prove difficult to establish. Nevertheless, both government and private institutions began studying the Ennore Creek more intimately in order to determine the rate of toxic accumulation that the spill had caused and thereby slowly also build a small database of the estuary's biochemical properties. This, however, was not without its tensions.

When I got to Kuppam in October 2018, I had read a few published studies about the creek's hydrological disposition. Those reports showed that the increased heavy metal concentration in the estuary had escalated the stress endured by Ennore's mangrove ecosystem. Even before the spill, a few studies (See Vasanthi et al. 2013 and Gopal.V et al. 2016) had revealed that the presence of mercury, chromium, copper, cadmium and zinc were evident in both plant life and fish populations in the region. A post-spill study (Vasanthi et al. 2017) analysing the 'bioaccumulation' of heavy metals in mussels from Ennore and other coastal zones found concentrations that were high enough to pose a significant threat to human health, especially given the large quantities of local sea food consumed by residents within Ennore (Ibid., see also Kumar et al. 2020). Some of the findings had also sensationally made it across other popular news platforms. "Loaded with poison, Ennore Creek fish not safe for consumption" and "How your fish curry might contain mercury, lead and nickel" – read the headlines in the city section of an English language newspaper. The fish, it had become evident, was indeed very toxic. The fishermen, however, were irked by these reports for a number of reasons. Many of them were unsure who the "unknown people" with strange "computers" were. What were those people set to accomplish by studying the water?

When I met Simbu underneath the bridge one breezy November day, he narrated the story of how he had only recently ferried a few people to select parts of the river, where they had then probed the water with different devices, bottled samples of the water in jars and thereafter simply left. As he spoke of his inability to understand who those people actually were, where all the samples went and what came of the results – expressing his concern as to whether the government would respond favourably to the reports by shutting the power plants down – Simbu told me that it upset him that there was suddenly so much attention being given to Ennore. Whom was he now to trust? He knew that the air was hazardous, had read in the local paper that the water was toxic, and was once advised by an activist not to eat the fish he had caught. But no one had asked him what he thought, understood or believed. If the government had built a power plant by his village, thereafter poisoning the fish in the estuary he fished at by pumping toxic waste into the water, shouldn't he have had a say in the matter? Moreover, shouldn't the scientists and researchers be telling the government to stop running the power plants? Instead, it was reported that the fish was poisonous and unsafe to consume. Why was that the case?

> "If only no one had come to Ennore", Simbu mumbled, "everything would have been fine."

Similarly perplexed when it came to studies of Ennore's polluted water, Velu's allegation was that those who studied the estuary had never actually swum in the river. It was a waste of time, according to Velu, that people went through all that effort to collect a few samples of the polluted water when they could have simply asked the fishermen to give them the details. As he said:

> "We know what the water is like. We see what it does to our bodies. You must understand, only by entering the water do we earn an income."

Then, pointing to the aberrations on his chest, arms and legs, Velu showed me the scars and marks that were left on his body as a result of his *thozil.* His monthly medical expenditure, he explained, kept rising steeply. Young children, even infants, he declared, were increasingly falling sick from the power plant's toxic chemicals. Combatting significant skin and respiratory illnesses at early ages, families in Kuppam had to focus on their children's health conditions throughout the year, changing the ways in which they approached their daily expenses to accommodate unexpected overheads. "But who listens to us?", Velu asked.

Respiratory issues, skin lesions and infections aren't new to the region. Mukul Kumar (2016) notes that there was an increase in health problems since the introduction of the power plants, swelling annual expenditure on health-related issues for fishers in the region. Similarly, sustained contact with the water, a necessity for the type of fishing in the region, resulted in many skin related issues - typically "psoriasis and hives" (Omjasvin 2020). Both water borne and air borne diseases and infections were common across Ennore and the fishers were consistent in evidencing this through their medical receipts or with their own bodies. Doctor appointments, extra medicines, travel costs, all of this only confirmed what they already knew: that their relation to their landscape had become increasingly mediated through coal-linked toxic substances. In other words, I argue, toxicities had become the modality through which they lived in intimate relation with their environment.

For Pandian, on the other hand, while he also smelt the putridity of the power plant's emissions, had scars on his body to show me what the water did to him, the fish – his meal nearly every day of the week – he assured me did him no harm. Puffing his chest and broadening his shoulders, as to show me that he was indeed in good bodily health, he asked me if he wasn't best placed to judge how toxic the fish was.

> "If anything happened to me because of the fish, I would be the first to say don't eat it. I know it is okay. I feel it okay in my body. Then, tell me, how can someone else come and say the fish has mercury in it? Do they do our *thozil*? Do they eat the fish every day? Tell me, boy, am I right or not?"

When Pandian asked me that question, I responded with a vague shake of the head, so that he mistakenly assumed that I agreed with him. In honesty, I had thought Pandian was only partially right. As I had understood it, the fish was toxic because of the power plants, the oil spill and all of the other industrial refuse that was pumped into the Ennore Creek. Wasn't that the case?

> "The power plant is ruining our lives", Pandian had loudly said. "That is what people should be saying. The fish is fine."

Not long after that, our conversation had drifted away, till night had fallen upon us, and it had become time for me to head back to my home in the city's southern corner. Riding back, I wondered why I had chosen to conceal my disagreement with Pandian, especially when it had implications for his own health. However, I did understand his frustrations. Despite their different claims and uncertainties about what was actually toxic in their landscape, in fact, Velu, Simbu and Pandian were all upset for the same reason: no one had once asked them what they knew, thought or felt.

Here, I am not advocating that the fishermen of Kuppam be seen as capable of replacing scientific studies of bioaccumulation and aquatic heavy metal retention. Rather, I suggest that they strongly expressed the desire to have been included within the larger fold of such scientific enquiry. Not as subjects of examination, but as people making everyday observations and measurements of their immediate environment, with their bodies, akin to what Kath Weston (2017) suggests are "embodied empiricists". In her book *Animate Planet*, Weston writes that embodied empiricism produces a type of "bio-intimacy" that typifies the connections one makes with one's environment through sensorial contact. Embodied empiricism, she expands, "choreographs a bio-intimacy of detection and assessment, which registers conditions through membrane, skin and retina, then uses reason to sort out the results" (2017:119). Further, discussing the body as an instrument of measure and drawing examples of the body calculating heat through excessive (or lack of) sweat; rains through the presence (or absence) of migratory birds; or of marking radioactive contamination through the grazing practices of sheep; Weston suggests that these quotidian bodily measures are best understood as key observations and explorations that validate the truth about a changing climate. Here, Weston's assertion is crucial and invites us to rethink Velu's statement that the

people who measured the river's concentration in chemicals never swam in it. It unravels Simbu's assertion that he was never asked what he thought and pushes us to reconsider how Pandian argued that the fish he ate every day of his life could not possibly be toxic. Their bodies, one way or the other, had equally evidenced the toxic substances that floated in Kuppam. In other words, they were all revealing to me their findings as embodied empiricists.

In asking for the aberrations on his body, of recovering and faded skin, to also be understood as measurements of the polluted river, Velu was insisting that he had already known how toxic the water was. As were Simbu and Pandian. Simultaneously, when they referred to the heat their bodies felt when they swam in the river; the sharp sensations that their feet combatted when they traversed the riverbed at night; itchy skin when they stitched torn nets in the net mending area the following day – all those accounts of perceptions highlighted the tedious bodily measurements and calculations that they regularly made about the air and water that surrounded them.

At the same time, these measurements were juxtaposed with other, more cognitive calculations: the inflated medical expenses that increasingly commanded daily life in Kuppam; the headlines that reported that the fish was laden with mercury; bids as to who were the groups of unknown people with electronic devices carrying back samples of water. Water that *they*, the fishermen, knew so well. As Velu had anxiously wondered, *why didn't those people just ask the fishermen?*

While Simbu and Velu conveyed this to me in a straightforward manner, plainly telling me that the people who studied the water had never asked them what they knew, Pandian adamantly refuted the notion that the fish was toxic. His body was proof that the fish was safe to consume as he had lived off that fish for many years. Simultaneously, his *thozil* was also intimately linked to that fish. While he knew how chemicals clouded Ennore's landscape, using, as the others did, his own body to detail what floated in the water and what had swarmed the air because of the operation of power plants – he felt that declaring the fish as toxic unjustly extended to the fishers themselves. In other words, they were no longer, then, embodied-measurers of a toxic landscape but were instead rendered a part of what made up the pollution, the toxic refuse, and the sickening smells – for the fish was inseparable from their bodies, lives and livelihoods.

When Pandian angrily disqualified non-practitioners of *thozil* from making statements about the fish, telling me that the "big", "city" scientists and activists did not know what they were speaking about, I believe he was emphasising two points. First, though he did not state it explicitly, I suggest that Pandian's assertions were a reaction to the caste and class structures that segregated the industrial peninsula of Ennore from other residential and commercial areas. Recent scholarship (Coelho 2020, 2018; Coelho and Raman 2013) on Chennai's urban expanse has shown how the city's planning frameworks have continually maintained forms of spatial segregation by pushing large scale industrial activity (like thermal power plants and ports) to spaces that are most often inhabited by working class, lower caste and minority populations. For Mukul Kumar (2016) this segregation goes hand in hand with the state governments invention and maintenance of planning categories like the 'margins of the city', thereby classifying select spaces as being just beyond 'city limits' in a bid to invite more industrial investments. In particular, in the case of Ennore, Kumar adds that these planning categories, coupled with the fishers lower caste status, permitted the government to approve and sanction the construction of the thermal power plants – meaning that the fishers of Kuppam were subject to greater risk of interacting intimately with toxic substances, sometimes through large-scale industrial calamities like the oil spill, as a matter of government policy. In turn, the scientific studies of Ennore that were conducted as a result of the oil spill, reiterated these class and caste distinctions by marking the where and what that was being studied, and more so, who it was that was doing the studying. Much like Selva had told me in the opening section of this chapter, environmentalists and anthropologists could eventually return to the "elsewhere" they came from and "make a name" for themselves, leaving the fishers where they were.

Secondly, Pandian was also upset that the reports never took into account the kinds of bio-intimacies that the fishermen shared with their landscape. In other words, such reports only made Pandian's landscape's toxicities perceptible to different publics in ways that muted the fishermen's own embodied measurements of the place they called "home". Just like Pandian had accused the government of not 'seeing' like the fishermen, maintaining the belief that the government had 'cheated' them by destroying the estuary with the operation of the power plants, he held the same accusation for the scientists and researchers who came to Ennore and studied the water. By discounting his empirical findings, and problematizing his *thozil*, those reports amplified that disruptive, ambiguous 'feeling' he habitually felt of being

fixed in a place that he knew was consistently changing. They were sometimes "voiceless", as Simbu put, in their own "home". In one way, this was what that feeling meant.

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> "You should have seen how it was before", Velu told me as we sat on his boat, riding to his section of the river in the evening. "You could see all the way down to the riverbed. This was before the power plants came. Before the *companies* [in English] surrounded us."

Thus far, I have offered two sections wherein I have discussed the pervasive 'feeling' of both fixity and material flux that many of the fishermen told me about. I have shown how this feeling, while stemming from certain cognitive states and thoughts that were 'inside' the fishermen, also incorporated different sensorial evaluations and embodied measurements of the toxicities that clouded their landscape on the 'outside'. While most of these embodied measurements stemmed from their practice of *thozil*, the ethnography thus far has not offered any descriptive analysis of *thozil* in itself. The next section, thus, shifts focus to the fishermen's *thozil* more closely. As I observed Velu wading through the river with his nets, telling me stories of a recent past that had gone by – like how he could see the bed of the river before the power plants were constructed – I learnt of how such perceptions accrued in him, "revealing the experience of time in and upon the body" (Finkelstein 2019:75), thereby, amplifying that feeling of both fixity and change.

Thus, the following section focuses on the experiences of time undergone by the fishermen in and upon their working bodies, and more importantly, during their *thozil*. Crucially, I show that there was a multiplicity of times – past, present and future; speeding up and stagnating; patterned in and out of sync – that they simultaneously had to deal with as they fished. Mediating this density of discrepant times (Bear 2014) through their *thozil*, I argue, can be usefully pictured as the navigation of a "temporal chokepoint" (Carse et al. 2020, Cons 2020) in this landscape of coal and it is this that I turn to now.

'All the time'

> "All the fertile lands have become *companies* [in English] now. In fifty years, we won't be here. In fifty years, we won't even have rice. Isn't that the truth?"

Velu was already in the river when he told me that. He had tied his boat to a wooden pole, which he had earlier plunged into the riverbed to prevent the boat, and me sitting in it,

from drifting away with the current. Then, standing in the river, with the water just about reaching his bare stomach, he drove a second pole deep below the surface of the river. He proceeded to test the strength of that pole, examining how resistant it was to a few determined antagonistic pulls, and swam back satisfied. After having returned to the boat, he told me that he had heard about the sea's unremitting inland expansion. Environmental activists[10] had explained to the fishermen, during one of their campaigns in Ennore, that five kilometres of the shoreline was set to disappear in the next fifty years.

Was I in the city when the tsunami hit in 2004, Velu asked right after? I responded in the affirmative. He went on:

> "They [environmental activists, scientists] said there was something in the sea, but we didn't believe it until it hit. When they [the government] built the Kalpakkam Nuclear Power Plant our scientists had warned them then that there was something called a Tsunami. But who listens? Imagine if it had hit us at night. How many lives would have gone?"[11]

Then, with what I perceived as a vague reflexive stillness, he added:

"But what does that tell us about the loss of lives?"

I nearly lost my life during the tsunami, I thought at this moment, and almost interjected with my own experience: the story of a thirteen-year-old supposed to walk on the Nagapattinam beach with a local wildlife conservation group in search of nesting turtles, on that deadly December morning[12]. I had eventually stayed back only because train tickets were unavailable. But I refrained from saying anything: in fact, I knew that my childhood story provided no answer to Velu's question.

Having already moved away from me, Velu had taken two long wooden poles with him and had drilled them into the riverbed in the same way as before, near the first set of poles. He then tied the net he had carried with him to the end of one pole, temporarily leaving the nylon mass to float loosely in the water. After gauging the pole's strength by pulling at it strongly, he waded back to the boat and continued from where he had left his conversation. This time, he told me that the government simply had to "start working for the people".

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[10] Including Sriram, Murugan and their team, whom we have met in the introduction and will encounter again in Chapter 5.

[11] Also known as the Madras Atomic Power station, the nuclear power plant is located 80 kilometres south of Chennai in the coastal town of Kalpakkam. It was commissioned in 1984.

[12] The Nagapattinam district was the worst affected area in Tamil Nadu during the Tsunami in 2004. It is located approximately 300 kilometres south of Chennai.

> "But what do they [the government] do? They say they'll work for five years [the ruling term for an elected party] and then sit on the toilet. What can you do after that?"

Had I not seen the large groynes that the government were hurriedly building to save the last stretch of beach in Ennore, Velu went on asking me? Yes, I saw them every time I drove into Ennore, I told him.

> "It used to be impressive before the *companies* [in English] came", he continued. "Forests all around. You could even hear jackals at night. I used to get really scared. But now you can see for yourself. This is what happens when the *companies* [in English] come".

Pointing to the NCTPS, the power plant that was besides us, he told me that he wished it gone. But he knew it wouldn't be the case.

> "Don't worry about us", he then stated boldly, straightening his chest. "We'll run away somewhere early in the morning and find something else to do. But there are educated children here. That is the problem, because they are staying there in the village, having studied, but with no jobs... Imagine, the fishers themselves have children who have studied. But there is nothing here."

Where was he planning to run to, I attempted to ask – but Velu had swum away.

He had taken a few more wooden poles and had plunged them in, one by one, into the riverbed. He then took the nets that were left floating in the water and worked them through each of the poles that stood in the river, securing them tightly as to leave no loose ends. The entire unit, of poles and nets, formed a square – like a box with one open side – for the prawns, shrimp and fish to swim into. The poles were first erected by observing the direction of the river's current, and then the nets followed suit such that the catch would have to swim against the tide when it eventually encountered the nets. Simultaneously, the riverbed was measured with each pole that was sunk into it, such that the there was sufficient girth to hold the poles in the flowing water. Here, Velu used his feet to examine the upper surface of the riverbed, choosing the firmest portions for the poles to be drilled into. Each pole, thus, measured in depth and strength, positioned precisely to form a unit, were all routine tasks of his *thozil*.

Figure 6. Velu, partially immersed in the river, walk back to the boat with the NCTPS in the background, had just finished setting up a set of wooden poles.

He walked back toward me and pointed again at the NCTPS plant again. “Before”, he said, he could fish for three hours and that was enough. Now, at minimum, a shift of his *thozil* demanded six full hours.

> “That is all”, Velu said plainly. “All around this river they are building *companies* [in English] like this.”

We were, indeed, surrounded by the power plants and their infrastructures – the ‘companies’. The enormous and unmistakable NCTPS stood ominously to one side, puffing away clouds of steam into the air. The Vallur Thermal Power Station stood across on the opposite bank, eerily mirroring the NCTPS with every operative step. A coal conveyer belt ran all the way through from one power plant, across the river, disappearing to the other side over a small but thick patch of shrubbery. Behind the conveyer belt ran a rail line that moved coal from the port to the coal yards, the occasional freight train passing through. The same road I drove up on my motorcycle, coming from the South of Chennai, ran parallel to the river, ferrying trucks, buses, cars and bikes; all contributing to an unceasing motorized hum that echoed parallelly with the metallic throbbing of the power plants.

> “Who does it bother?”, Velu went on. “It bothers us fishermen. After the *companies* [in English] came, everything has gone. Now all you hear are trucks and power plants. Like this”, he pointed to the road, the rail line, the conveyor belt, the clouds of steam. “All the time.”

The conversation with Velu was dense with loaded accusations of the government's responsibility in transforming his landscape. On the one hand, he reiterated claims I have spoken of before – claims from village leader Pandian, and from the environmental activists working around Kuppam, such as Sriram's eloquent and vehement Facebook post in the Introduction – according to whom the government took only partial notice of who and what composed of this landscape. Here, evidence of coastal erosion, according to Velu, could be read as the clear mark of a government that was in no way "working for the people" of Kuppam. The sea was rising, had already eaten into the coastline and thinned out many beaches across the Bay of Bengal – Velu himself, I knew, had seen some images that the activists had put up close to Kuppam – and yet still more ports and power plants were being sanctioned and constructed in Ennore . He told me that political leaders were corrupt and only interested in electoral successes. Once in power, they could enjoy juicy pays (from money siphoned through power plant operations) and heavy meals (as suggested by his claim that all they had to do was go "to the bathroom"). When Velu spoke of the 2004 tsunami – a devastating natural calamity that had caused significant socio-natural distress across Tamil Nadu – he had similarly narrated it as a story of governmental corruption and neglect. It was the familiar tale of a government showing no worry for the innumerable lives that were lost, and worse, no concern still for the lives that could still go.

Later, however, it struck me that Velu's loaded accusations did not only reiterate politically charged, familiar narratives of governmental corruption, failure and neglect. I suggest that his accusations simultaneously stemmed from his own intimate, embodied and biographical perception of the changes cutting through his landscape. As his body moved in and out of the water, Velu heard, saw, smelt and felt the temporal consequences of the government's actions (and neglect) around Ennore: with each pole he manually drilled into the riverbed he could measure the rate of sediment accumulation, with each net that was tied to the edges of the poles he could map out changes in tidal patterns. The point I want to foreground here, is that through the practice of his *thozil*, Velu made temporal assessments about his landscape, locating a range of moments at which the government had caused perceptible and disruptive changes. When Velu unabashedly singled out the government – and its extension in 'companies' like TANGEDCO – as responsible for the changes he experienced, his claims were laid out in temporal registers, shored up by his own singular perception and feeling of the contrast between "now", "before" and even imaginations of a landscape "in fifty years". Thus, the landscape he experienced and described unfolded in time

as much as in space. Moreover, as I will show, his experiences of the landscape were also composed of 'feeling' a multiplicity of different and contrasting times.

Recently, scholars across geography and anthropology have given increasing credit to the idea that "space and time are inextricably interwoven" (Massey 1994: 261) and that people's lives unfold through "a multiplicity of times, a number of which might be moving at different speeds and even in different directions" (Thrift and May 2001:12; see also Bedi 2021; Sur 2020; Cresswell 2006; Munn 1992; Lefebvre 1991). In studying novelistic narratives, literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin describes the intricate "chronotopes" which can pattern people's lives, showing that times are "mutually inclusive, they co-exist, they may be interwoven with, replace or oppose one another, contradict one another, or find themselves in ever more complex interrelationships" (1981: 252). In her study of the transformation of the Hooghly River's economies, Laura Bear furthers Bakhtin's point, to speak of the ways in which "diverse representations, technologies, disciplines, and rhythms of social time" coexisted in her field site (Bear 2014a). Her work with people whose lives and livelihoods were tied to the Hooghly River's "chronotopes" shows how the time of capitalist processes could never be reduced to the single, overbearing temporality that mattered for her interlocutors. Instead, for river pilots, marine officers or bureaucrats, capitalist time intersected with a multiplicity of other times – including the changing tidal rhythms of the river, different socio-political histories of governance, or ecological and geological histories of the estuary (Bear 2015).

In Ennore's shifting landscape, Velu's life was similarly patterned into diverse, coexisting times which came into disturbing overlaps during the practice of his *thozil*. Crucially, as he summoned memories of "before", Velu was inviting me not only to experience present sights, sounds and smells, but also to merge those with elements of his own past, by also sensing and feeling things that he had known but that were no longer there. Velu suggested that I see the forests by which he had grown up unfold around us, instead of the power plants that puffed steam into the sky. He evoked his childhood awe at the jackals' howl, attempting to superimpose it over the truck horns bellowing into the air. He summoned the scent of Casuarina trees, overlapping it over the prickling stench of the coal dust that hit us strongly. In doing so, he showed me a biographical landscape, composed of memories of his past, unfolding along a current landscape awash with coal. In other words, past and present chronotopes merged into Velu's account of his landscape, pointing at a work of temporal mediation that his *thozil* required of him. This biographical and temporal sense-

making led him to produce explanations and judgments, as when he unambiguously held the government and the companies accountable for the shifts – past, present, and even future – he saw and foresaw in Ennore's landscape.

However, when Velu asked me to superimpose the howls of jackals over the drone of the conveyer belt, or asked me to visualise thick mangrove forests instead of the power plants, I was unable to do as he said. This was, in part, because I wasn't a fisherman and didn't share in his memories of a life in Kuppam "before the *companies* came". But I want to suggest here that my inability to see what Velu showed me was also due to the overwhelming presence of coal in the landscape. The beat of the conveyer belt, the arrhythmic sounds of the car and truck horns, the power plant's perforated release of steam, the coal dust that swarmed the air – those industrial times and rhythms were all too constant and loud; eating into my senses; and as Velu had said, "all the time". Michael Taussig (2004) writes at length about the sound of the *doble* (double) rings of a church bell that marked the "day of the dead" in his field site in rural Colombia. While the setting he invokes – a religious festival – has little in common with my own, what is of significance for my argument here is Taussig's description of his experience of hearing the bells ring for the entire course of a day, as an intense sensorial modality of being present. The ringing of the bell, he writes, ran "beside" and "inside" you, becoming an "intimate part of you, like your sweat or heartbeat" – never ceasing.

> They seem like they're talking, these bells, but also playing, turning speech into the language of things, like the birds wheeling in the sky over the esstuary, writing their stories and looping their loops in synchrony with the landscape below. (2004: 75)

Later on, reflecting on my own video recordings of that day spent with Velu, as he had pushed me to sense and feel the shifting, overlapping times of his landscape, Taussig's account of the bells struck an unpleasant chord with me. I wondered about the ways in which the power plants had looped their loops and written their rhythms into Velu's landscape. Unrelentless, perpetual, and pervasive, coal's presence had left me somehow fixed to its sensorial command. Here, I invite the reader to use this link[13] to watch and listen to some of the audio-visual material I had recorded during my fieldwork. From this record of my own experience, I would like to argue that the density of sensorial and affective stimuli that Velu daily lived with also relentlessly commanded his attention to coal, to the power plants and to

[13] There are four videos in this link and can be accessed in the playlist bar to the side.

their infrastructures. This multiplicity of coal-linked times, and their looping into his landscape, collected into this disturbing 'feeling' of fixity tangled with change.

Anthropologists writing with 'time' in mind have recently attempted to undo the predominance of speed as a temporal measure for capitalist modernity. Some have coined the concept of "chokepoint" to describe contemporary "zones of operative paradox" which carry promises of heightened connectivity and speed – yet end up constricting flows of people and things (Carse et. al 2020). As both a site of flux and of stagnation, I want to argue that the landscape of coal that the fishermen felt and sensed through their *thozil* may well be characterized as a temporal chokepoint "in which the range of possible futures, the time frames in which they may be brought about, and the material available to unfold future oriented projects are choked in ways that eliminate some possible outcomes and may, indeed, threaten all" (Cons 2020: 6). In thinking through the concept of a chokepoint, we would take seriously the idea that time itself textures and patterns landscapes, simultaneously aggregating at any given instant, potentially clogging temporal horizons in their density.

This perennial sensory barrage that the fishermen underwent during their *thozil,* an everyday reminder of coal's presence, past absence, and uncertain futures, severely interlaced with Velu's readings of his landscape. The junctures of discrepant times were made strangely vivid because it congested into a chokepoint – aggregating into a 'feeling' of fixity amidst a changing landscape; a 'feeling' he wanted to "run away from". Thus, fishing in this temporal chokepoint, I suggest, contributed to the nagging feeling' that the fishermen felt "all the time."

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have paid attention to a 'feeling' of simultaneous fixity and immense material flux that Kuppam's fishermen claimed they habitually felt. I have shown how this 'feeling' was linked to the construction and operation of the TANGEDCO power plants and have narrowed down my focus to the fishermen's *thozil* to explain what constituted this 'feeling'. During *thozil*, I have argued, the fishermen were not only "embodied empiricists" measuring the amount of chemical refuse that seeped through their bodies and landscape, but, also, encountered diverse and disparate temporal rhythms as they set up their nets in a river that faced the vagaries of Ennore's industrial disposition. The conjoint experiences of the cognitive, sensorial and temporal as the fishermen practiced their *thozil* in Ennore's

transformed landscape, all coagulated and strained through a “chokepoint”, significantly contributing to the ‘feeling’ of rigid fixity in a landscape that was rapidly shifting.

In the next chapter, I continue with my focus on the fishermen’s *thozil* by showing how the labour of fishing advanced upon them a messy conundrum: on the one hand, while *thozil* reinforced the fishermen’s ability to be ‘fishermen’, on the other, *thozil* simultaneously ratified their fears that they were not going to remain fishermen much longer. It is this aspect of *thozil* that I turn to next.

Chapter 2: Becoming 'coolies'

'Without our *thozil*, who are we?'

From the boat, about an hour before sunset, Velu and I saw the lights surrounding the power plants turn on. Slowly, as the sky gradually darkened, red lights began mingling with yellow ones, merging composedly with the flushes of white steam that shot out the top ends of the tall ringed chimneys. Then, when the night sky pinned itself to the edges of the horizon, the power plants sprung a remarkable transformation – appearing as if suddenly cloaked in a series of shiny ornaments – flaunting, flagrantly, the sheer expanse of their industrial presence. Steadily, and in response, everything that supported the perennial operations of the power plants found manufactured radiance: the lights on the bridge; the lights on the coal conveyer belt; the streetlamps on the roads; the headlamps of the large trucks that carried coal into the plant's premises, exiting with copious loads of lethal bottom ash.

Watching this barrage of industry, Velu burst out with frustration:

"Here… the *companies* [in English] are everywhere… we and all are nothing."

As Velu's boat remained anchored beneath the northern bridge that granted a few industrial townships direct access to Ennore, he pointed to the floodlit concrete piers that stemmed over either bank of the river. The construction of the bridge, he insisted, had resulted in a surge of sedimentary deposits that rapidly caked up fluid sections of his river. This not only narrowed the river's course, but, simultaneously, he went on, hampered the tidal rhythms that were essential for the continual movement of prawns, thereby, drastically altering his *thozil*. Beyond the issue of returning home with a reduced catch, the bridge had made it necessary that he set up two to three sets of nets at any given time, thus increasing the bodily load that fell upon him every time he fished. And, only with the extra set of nets, he confirmed, did he stand a chance of making a living. "But who cared about the fisher's plight", he loudly asked, with his back rested to the sides of the boat, his hands twisted in defeat, as truck after truck rode above us in oblivion?

Then, following a brief pause, he went on:

> "Without our *thozil* who are we? Can we become *coolies* just like that? That itself we have to fight for here."

Quickly, in a defeated tone, he added:

"But tell me, what is left for us here? Everywhere, the *companies* [in English] have come."

A long period of silence fell upon Velu and I thereafter. Velu worked in and out of the water, installing the first set of nets, as I watched him from the boat, occasionally taking a photograph with my camera. Night fell thick upon us, punctured by the stream of lights glaring at us from the plant. As Velu took a break from that round of *thozil*, he spotted a figure standing on the bank.

"We will go pick him up", Velu said, and I realized here that someone else was to join us that night.

As we drew closer, I made out the young features of the man waiting for us. A backpack slung across his shoulder, dressed in a thin cotton shirt that was pleasantly matched with long grey trousers, he jumped on to the boat when it was within an arm's distance of him – jauntily landing by the stern, greeting Velu and nodding briskly at me as he stowed his backpack to the corner by the shaft. Surya, as I later got to know him, had joined Velu after a long shift at the private Lanson and Turbo (L&T)[14] shipbuilding yard which was a few kilometres north of Kuppam, where he held a short-term contract. As he said with a note of scorn:

"It is a small contract. Just *coolie velai* [coolie work]".

"But aren't you tired after a full shift at the yard?", I asked him.

Surya nodded in the negative. He thought about my question for a few seconds and then told me that at the L&T shipbuilding yard, under the steely watch of his supervisor – whom he called the "*company karaan"* (company man) –, he was consistently given orders. The constant ordering caused him "a real headache" he insisted, mimicking his supervisor's aggressions by pretending to bark instructions at Velu. Surya was "happy" to be on the boat that night, he then claimed, telling me that *thozil* offered him some "relief" from his experiences of coolie work. He took another measured pause, and then without hesitation, expressing himself in partial English, said:

"With my *thozil* I feel *free*".

14. The L&T shipbuilding yard is a major design and manufacturing hub that was established by the Indian multinational construction company in 2012. Located eight kilometres north of Kuppam and attached to a captive port complex in the village of Katupalli, the entire complex has changed corporate banners – now under the ownership of the Adani Group – and is actively expanding its effort to establish a new mega port in the region (See Introduction).

He mulled over his thoughts for a few brief seconds, and boldly added:

"Here, I am my own *owner* [in English]."

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The night out on the river with Velu and Surya provided me with many insights on the fishermen's relationship with their landscape, as the brief opening vignette begins to show. It recalls, as I have argued in the previous chapter, how their *thozil* provided them with embodied knowledge about the progression of Ennore's 'companies' into the landscape. Velu's story of the bridge was evidence of this. After the construction of the bridge – a TANGEDCO imposition –, Velu noticed a steady decline in prawn populations and suggested it was because of the ways in which the bridge had altered the river's sedimentary patterns. The river had thinned out because of it, yet the bridge continued to find steady maintenance and repair because it was essential to the companies' activities in Ennore. Thus, when Velu strode through the river, setting up extra sets of nets in a bid to keep his livelihood afloat, the increased bodily demands that fell upon him during his *thozil* felt to him as measure and proof of the companies' unrelenting expansions. Those experiences of *thozil*, as I have also argued, triggered and kindled in him a disruptive feeling of simultaneous fixity and flux.

In this chapter, I want to expose another conundrum that the fishermen faced as a result of practicing their *thozil* in an increasingly industrialised landscape. On the one hand, as their *thozil* come under considerable strain, it seemed that it was their own ability to identify as fishermen that was ruptured. This, I suggest, was strikingly evidenced by the fact that Velu's hampered *thozil* unearthed in him the fear of becoming a "coolie", a fear exposed in his anguished question – *can we become coolies just like that?*

And yet, on the other hand, *thozil* simultaneously appeared to reinforce the fishermen's ability to identify as 'fishermen'. For example, when Velu plaintively asked me who the fishermen were without their *thozil*, he drew emphasis to the reciprocal relationship that existed between male fisher identities and the bodily practice of fishing. Surya, having also echoed Velu's repugnance about the fishermen becoming "coolies", insisted that through the practice of *thozil*, he was able to wash away his experiences of coolie work. In Surya's statements, fishing and the practice of *thozil* were a way for him to 'feel *free*' and be his 'own

owner'. *Thozil* allowed Surya, in other words, to become a fisherman again, thereby acting as his bodily antidote from other forms of labour that stripped him from his fishing identity.

My night of accompanying Surya and Velu on the river thereby drew me to consider this paradox: that *thozil* seemed to be a site wherein male fisher identities found simultaneous bolstering and diluting in the context of the power plants' progression in the landscape. In this chapter, it is this aspect of *thozil* that I bring to the fore. I ask what it was that allowed Surya to feel *free* and question how it was that he became his own *owner*? Moreover, as the fishermen made increasingly risky bids to make a living in Ennore, they were compelled to confront and alternate *thozil* with other forms of labour, and in this chapter, I pay attention to this consistent shuttling between different forms of labour as well. In effect, I ask, how was it that they were becoming 'coolies'?

In the first section, I start by defining the terms 'coolies', 'company" and 'company *karaan*' by drawing on ethnographic examples. These terms, and some of their contextual specificities, are essential to the arguments that make up the core of this chapter and thus this section serves as a glossary for what is to follow. Simultaneously, these terms also enable me to outline the fraught labour market which had taken over Ennore's landscape, thereby, allowing me to layout the kinds of work that was in offer for the fishermen.

The second section comprises of a photo-essay. The photographs are visual depictions of the fishermen's *thozil* and are each accompanied with short ethnographic snippets from my time with Surya and Velu. While the photographs can be engaged with as a standalone piece within this chapter, I also draw the reader to certain images by referring to them within the main body of text in the sections to follow.

In the third section, I begin focussing on the contradictory pulls of *thozil* by carefully examining Surya's statements that his *thozil* offered him an ability to 'feel *free*' and be his 'own *owner*'. The 'freedom' Surya claimed he felt, I argue, can be comprehended in two ways. First, I suggest that Surya's ability to feel *free* stemmed from his juxtaposition of the bodily demands of coolie work with the bodily demands of *thozil*, thereby remedying two very "different histories of capital" (Chakrabarty 2000) as he waded through the water with Velu. Moreover, by practicing *thozil* after "coolie" work, I argue that Surya deliberately reinvigorated his ability to be a 'fisherman' in Ennore's shifting landscape.

Simultaneously, alongside the labour of *thozil*, the fishermen had to evaluate the possibilities and harms afforded by a range of different kinds of work: the treacherous allure

of contract work, the ambiguity of permanent positions as a company *karaan*, and even new forms of river-based work that somehow distorted *thozil* itself. Thus, I argue that Ennore's labour market had become a site of "mediation" (Bear 2014a) wherein the fishermen also found a measure of 'freedom' in their ability to move from one position to the next. In other words, freedom, I argue, was also a form of value produced and sought by the fishermen through their 'labour' of navigating their landscape's changing job market (Ibid.).

In the fourth and final section of this chapter, I discuss how the limit between *thozil* and coolie work was disturbingly blurred out by the sudden rise in demand for river worms called *poochis* – mainly from industrialised prawn farms. This amplified conflicts within and beyond the fishers of Kuppam, with some seeing the *poochi* business as essential to their ability to live and survive in Ennore. For others, like Velu, it instead marked the painful conversion of their *thozil* itself into a form of coolie work – prompting him to suggest that there was truly "nothing" left for the fishers in Kuppam. This section also comes with an internet link to a video file that can be accessed in the digital version of this thesis.

'Companies', 'Company *Karaan*' & 'Coolies'

Companies

Referring to the blatant industrialisation of Ennore, the term 'companies' was interchangeably used by the fishermen to refer to both state-owned enterprises and privately managed industries. For example, both the private L&T shipbuilding yard at which Surya held a temporary contract – his coolie work – and the public TANGEDCO-owned power plants were labelled companies by the fishermen. Moreover, both companies were equally accused of routinely "cheating" and "fooling" the people of Ennore.

As one fisherman from Kuppam explained to me in detail, both private and government-owned industries in the region not only coercively and sometimes illegally took away large tracts of land and encroached upon waterbodies, but, simultaneously, also offered the fishers very little in terms of compensation. Moreover, insisting that the alliance between the government and private industries was essential to their combined operations, excluding the fishers from reaping the socio-economic benefits that supposedly came with the industrialization of their landscape, the fisherman even jokingly added that every vote in Ennore was directly transferred to company management through the elected government representative. Thereby, by emphasising that the government was nothing but an electoral

mask for Ennore's industries, the fisherman's statements echoed contemporary scholarship (See Harris and Michelutti 2019, Jeyeranjan 2019, Sissener 2019) that expands on how local populations use terms like 'company' to address broader illegal and even criminal political economies in South Asia. I suggest that Surya and Velu's own use of the term 'company' was similarly layered with such an accusation and spoke to the range of governmental illegalities (See Introduction) that were attached to the power plants.

Now, I pay attention to the ancillary term – 'company *karaan*' – with a short ethnographic vignette about Surya'a arrival that night.

Company karaan

Waiting to join Velu and I, Surya had stood by the banks of the river, watching the boat slowly wade its way towards him. As he got onboard, Velu, instantly, brought him up to speed with all of the thozil he had finished up until then; Surya following every word intently. Then, Velu, embellishing the tone of his voice as to mock the younger fisherman, asked Surya why he was late.

> "You know what they are like", Surya said, reacting impulsively. "They will say one thing and then do something else and like that you're just stuck there. Anyway, now I'm here. That is enough for me. Now, I'm happy."

An exchange of laughs drew their conversation to a close, speedily dissipating Velu's provocations, kindling my own curiosity as a result. However, I was cautious not to come across as inquisitive, given that Surya and I were meeting for the first time that night, and instead, waited to find a suitable moment to properly introduce myself to him. When that moment arose, I gave Surya a rehearsed description about my research project and made it a point to include the fact that the fishermen's *thozil* had become crucial to my study, hoping it would facilitate a lengthier interaction between us at a later stage. To my introduction, Velu even intervened to vouch for me, throwing in a complimentary comment about my resolve to stay on the boat with them till the early hours of the morning. He patted me warmly on the shoulder in an effort to express his comfort with me having been there.

But somewhat unflatteringly, Surya only responded with a cursory nod of the head as he quickly shifted focus. In an impatient tone, he enquired if it was not already time for Velu and him to draw the first batch of nets, already walking up towards one of the wooden ores

that lay by the side of the boat. Unperturbed, Velu made a curious remark in response. Jokingly, he said:

> "What, man, Surya? You only just got here. Already you are speaking like a *company karaan*?"

At first, Surya refused to respond to Velu altogether, merely smirking as he took one of the wooden ores from the floorboard and proceeded to take a stance by the boat's stern. Velu followed promptly, moving towards the other end of the boat, tiptoeing across me with a second ore balanced across his shoulders. Only once they began rowing towards the nets, did Surya find his voice again. Wistfully, he asked Velu:

> "When will they ever let us become a *company karaan*?"

Following which, he curiously added:

> "If that day comes, I'll run away from here… If that day comes, I'll go and find a life somewhere else."

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The term Surya and Velu used, 'company *karaan*', translates from Tamil to English as 'company man' – with the lexical suffix *karaan* loosely meaning 'man of', thereby fixing its subject to a masculine identity even in figurative contexts. In the fishermen's use of the term company *karaan*, the expression 'company' held on to connotations previously mentioned: suggesting a propensity for corruption and illegalities – extending, in this case, to the company *karaan* as well. Moreover, a TANGEDCO engineer who worked at the government-run power plant would be called a company *karaan*, as would a managerial staff member at a private coal yard, thereby marking no clear distinction between state and private-run enterprises. What clubbed such individuals as company *karaan* was usually the significant socio-political authority they possessed as full-time employees with administrative responsibilities. This association is central as the term did not apply to contractual employees who held low-qualified positions in similar workspaces. Thus, Surya, was jokingly called a company *karaan*, and in fact was far from one, as all he held was a short-term labour contract at the shipbuilding yard. Additionally, and as Velu explained to me at a later stage of my fieldwork, the company *karaan* was hardly ever a local resident to Ennore. Either coming from elsewhere in Chennai, from other parts of Tamil Nadu, or even other states in India, the company *karaan* was infamous for sitting atop Ennore's changing labour relations while holding hardly any concern for the damage it caused local populations, however, sanctioning the industrialisation of their landscape with impunity.

My recollection of a small incident can be helpful here, to highlight the pervasiveness of the term company *karaan* in the larger urban context of Chennai. Sometime during fieldwork, as I was waiting at the local pharmacy in the neighbourhood I lived in, forty kilometres south of Kuppam, the customer in front of me attempted to return some of the medicines she had purchased a few days earlier. She insisted that the medicines had remained unused and went at lengths to argue that returning them was within her "right". The pharmacist, paying no heed to her request, retorted: "…the *company karaan* himself said I can't accept it because he won't take it back. If you want, you speak to him and ask him."

After a heated exchange, the customer left the pharmacy with her medicines, threatening to escalate the issue to a local consumer court. The pharmacist, unperturbed, remained quiet. After the customer left, speaking to me, the pharmacist said:

> "Tell me, if I tell the company *karaan* that this lady says it is her 'right' to return the medicine, will he listen? He's a company *karaan* after all. How can I tell him he has to take the medicines back? Even to speak to him is so difficult. I can do without that headache."

The pharmacist's statements unravel how the company *karaan* – the pharmaceutical representatives who had supplied him with the medicines in this case – held a coercive position. The pharmacist was not a company *karaan* but fell under the company *karaan's* web of authority, rules and regulations, leaving him almost no autonomy to engage with his business in ways he might deem appropriate. Moreover, interactions with the company *karaan* caused the pharmacist bodily pain, a "headache" he insisted, and he would do better without having to interact with the company *karaan*. I suggest that when Velu told Surya he spoke like a company *karaan*, he was in fact facetiously referring to this controversial, influential and often maligned figure who held considerable socio-economic authority in Chennai, Ennore and beyond, and appeared often during my fieldwork.

Coolies

Can we become coolies just like that, Velu had asked? Here, the word 'coolie' requires some contextualizing. The colloquial expression *coolie velai* meaning 'coolie work' was frequently used by the fishermen I met in Kuppam to speak of the sprawling informal market that offered wage work in Ennore: temporary jobs that were overwhelmingly linked to the coal-based industries. In parallel, 'coolie work' was also used by the fisherman as a shorthand

for the formal (yet equally temporary) work positions offered by contractors and subcontractors around Ennore – what people also referred to as *contract velai* or 'contract work'. Whether it designated formal or informal work, the fishermen's use of the word 'coolie' indexed their aversion for the temporariness of jobs at the end of which they would simply be discarded and required to find another means to sustain their livelihoods. Coolie work also pointed at the nature of the temporary positions the fishermen could generally access – jobs that required no specific set of skills and were highly monotonous and sometimes hazardous.

Moreover, coolie work in Ennore generally fell under the coercive authority of a company *karaan*. Here, the word 'coolie' was then directly reminiscent of 19th century Asiatic indentured labour, and of its subjection to the violence of colonial authority (See Valentine 2008). As Nitin Varma writes (2016), during the British Raj, coolies themselves often rose to become the subjects of their own histories, juxtaposing their embodied labour with their own personal experiences in colonial India, thereby expanding the identity of those indentured labourers far beyond their equation with "plantation costs" on paper documents. I suggest that this helps us examine Velu's own comments about his refusal of "becoming a coolie just like that". Echoing with the colonial histories that Varma writes about, I suggest that Velu's anxiety of becoming a 'coolie' was based on the notion that his personal history as a fisherman would be erased if he partook in coolie work. At the same time, his refusal of coolie work was an attempt to disrupt the narrow simplification which he felt the term would impose on him.

Velu also insisted that the process of accessing coolie work was embroiled in "fights" and conflicts, thereby increasing his resentment towards the companies' authority in Ennore. Surya's own example of how he had accessed his previous contract position at the government-operated port clarifies this point, by showing the fraught relation he had needed to engage with.

Surya explained to me that after tenuous negotiations with a local sub-contractor[15], Surya had managed to find coolie work as a stevedore at the government-operated port.

[15] Scholars (see Parry 2013, Sanchez 2017) have shown how the intervention of networks of middlemen was often essential for local populations to find temporary work positions, as they were increasingly priced out by powerful labour contractors who brought in vast numbers of men and women from other Indian states to fill up precarious and often hazardous work positions. This link with middlemen, as Surya pointed at, drastically reduced the workers' salaries, once the middlemen cut away their payment from it.

During the three months he held the job, a quarter of his salary was siphoned off as payment to the sub-contractor who had helped put him on the company roll. Following that, his contract was suddenly and illegally terminated without notice and his overtime dues were withheld, leading him to believe that his subcontractor had struck a deal with port management when his dues had peaked at a predefined amount. Having no means to resolve the issue, insisting that his only recourse would have been a lengthy and perhaps inconclusive fight through a trade union, Surya insisted that he was left considerably distressed with the entire experience. It was different, he explained, at the private L&T shipbuilding yard, as he had accessed an eight-month labour contract through a friend of his who held direct connections with the L&T managerial staff, thereby eliminating the sub-contractor altogether. However, he still did not necessarily expect to have his overtime payments come through, given the delusion of his previous experiences.

In fact, Surya, told me, he had joined Velu and I late that night because he had put in an extra "half shift" at his job, as an under-construction naval vessel was reaching completion. His manager, he said, had put out a request for the workers to do the extra hours that were needed for the company to stick to deadlines. Compensation would reflect in their salaries, the L&T manager had told him, but as Surya put it, "they will say one thing and then do something else". If one could not trust the subcontractor, one had to be just as wary of the company *karaan.*

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Thus far, in detailing the terms 'companies', 'company *karaan*' and 'coolie', I have attempted to give a sense of the fractured job market that Ennore offered its labouring classes. As Jonathan Parry writes (2013), in the context of contemporary industrial India, I too suggest that the category of 'working class' no longer holds much analytical ground. Instead, as Parry argues in his decades long study of a public sector steel plant in Chhattisgarh, workers increasingly fell into a fragmentation of different categories, where the distinctions between skilled and unskilled labour held less purchase than the distinction between temporary and permanent work. In other words, it was the security of a permanent position that marked workers as more privileged, and within access of the authoritative position of the company *karaan*. In contrast and aggravated by neoliberal economic practices that transformed India's labour market, majority of workers were compelled into taking up

precarious contract labour (Parry 2009), funnelled into short term jobs that Velu and Surya dismissed (yet took up) as 'coolie work', thereby widening the divide between permanent workers and contractual employees. Parry's research is then helpful in unpacking the companies' transformation of Ennore's labour relations and this takes up more focus in the following chapter. For now, I ask, where did *thozil* fit within Ennore's fractured job market? What was it that allowed Surya to 'feel *free*'? What did becoming his 'own *owner*' mean?

To expand on these questions more effectively, I first offer a small photo-essay that shows what made up the practice of *thozil* in a heavily industrialised landscape. While the photo-essay offers some insight into the specificities of *thozil*, continuing from what was presented in the previous chapter, it also serves to show the strenuous work Surya took on immediately after his shift at the L&T shipbuilding yard. Following from the photo-essay, in the next section, I return with some more ethnography – beginning with Surya's response to my question about the freedom and ownership he supposedly felt during *thozil.*

Photo Essay: *Thozil* and the freedom of being a fisherman

As the following photo essay will show, *thozil* made rigorous bodily demands of the fishermen. It was demanding work that left their bodies tired and worn out. But it also drew their movements into carefully sequenced rhythms, a "pattern of dextrous activity" (Ingold 2000:352) that ended at daybreak, and in which I could see both Surya and Velu find forms of comfort and satisfaction. Alongside the physical strain of *thozil*, there appeared to be something pleasurable in the precise unfolding of the men's movements, and in the temporal rhythms in which the men weaved those movements. Some space and time were frayed open for humour and pauses, and there was a sense that Velu and Surya were 'free' to set the pace at which they worked. As Tim Ingold writes, the "rhythm" of such skilled labour is perhaps set "not within fixed parameters but within a framework that is itself suspended in movement, in an environment where nothing is quite the same from moment to moment" (2021:74).

The pictures that follow attempt to make sense of this rhythm of bodily labour. At the same time, however, they also show how *thozil* itself was changing, putting increasing strain on the fishermen whose livelihoods depended upon it.

Bodies in the water

Figure 7. Bodies in the water.

After having anchored their boat a few meters from the first batch of nets, Surya stomached the serrated chills of the night-time winds as he got ready to swim in the river. Cursing under his breath, he clinched his fists in response, bracing himself for what was still to come. He felt the water with his right foot, dabbing the surface of the river with his toes, cursing again in ostensible discomfort. This drew another chuckle out of Velu – who by then was already in the water, swimming towards the nets – teasing Surya for his hesitation. Paying no heed to Velu's taunts, Surya slowly proceeded to insert his right leg into the river, sighing with his eyes shut tight. He took a deep breath of air, his left leg still arched on the boat, and in an instant, decided that there was no more time for measured manoeuvres. In one swift motion, a burst of water – he was in the river – cussing loudly as his head bobbed to the surface, puffing his cheeks in a bid to steady his nerves. Quickly, he swam towards the first batch of nets, and together with Velu, untied them in a matter of minutes. Thereafter, having dragged the nets through the water, bringing them to the edge of the boat, Surya hopped back on, pulling the entire catch on to the floorboard with him. This photograph (Figure 7) captures that moment. Immediately after, Velu followed suit, pulling himself effortlessly on deck, and, together, they gently shook the nets such that the fish, prawns, crabs – even the

lone Checkered Keelback (a common Indian water snake) – all fell to the floor. The snake was first to be released back into the water. Curiously, all the fish and crabs were released next. I asked Velu why that was the case and he told me that there was no money in the market for them, not for those specific species of fish and crabs at least. The prawns, he insisted, the larger tiger prawns in particular, were where their profits lay.

The nets

Figure 8. The nets.

With their catch sprawled onto the floor, Velu and Surya went on to inspect their nets thoroughly, checking them to see if there were any large open ends that warranted immediate repair. That night, they were satisfied with the way their nets had held up, slipping back into the water and resetting them in the exact same positions thereafter. Subsequently, they moved to the second unit of nets and repeated the same processes all over again. Velu had set up three units in total, which meant that Surya and he had to undo; unload; check and then reset three sets of nets in quick succession. Following which, they had an additional batch of three units to cover in an alternative location. This particular photograph captures the detailed inspections of the nets. Moreover, the viewer is asked to pay attention to the bridge in the background – the same northern bridge that spurred Velu's angst in the opening vignette.

Fire in the sky

Figure 9. Fire in the sky.

Eventually, after the last net was undone and thereafter redrawn, Velu and Surya hopped back on to the boat and wiped their bodies dry. Tiptoeing around the wriggling pile of small and large prawns, they kneeled down to the floor and carefully examined their catch against the light of their headlamps – exchanging a few notes about the size of the tiger prawns in particular. Expressing mild delight with their catch that night, Velu pushed two large plastic sieves from the corner of the boat, sliding them across to the centre, while Surya began segregating the prawns. Small prawns were transferred into one sieve and the large prawns into the other, with copious amounts of water being poured over each pile such that the mud that was caked around the shells were rinsed clean; a brown sedimentary run off draining at the boat's central chute. In uneasy contrast, lit up brightly in the background, was the massive NCTPS – one of the "companies" that had taken over their landscape.

The catch

Figure 10. The catch.

Once the catch was segregated into different sieves, washed and cleaned, Velu and Surya transferred them into the large ice box that they had brought along. Depending on the size of their catch, it was transferred to the fisherwomen who chose to sell the prawns at the smaller local market, or taken by the men to the city fish market where wholesale consumers bid for larger orders. However, both Velu and Surya repeatedly maintained that the size of their catch had been steadily dwindling down with the operation of the power plants, leaving them with reduced earnings on any given day. Increasingly, they had no choice but to supplement their earnings from *thozil* with coolie *velai*. The "companies", they had both bemoaned, had taken everything in Ennore.

Labouring for Freedom

'Even with thozil we need a contract'

As the photo essay has shown, the practice of *thozil* involved strenuous physical work and extended from early evening all the way until dawn. Moreover, in performing it, Surya insisted that he achieved a sense of 'freedom'. He told me he took on a long night of *thozil* after an entire day of coolie work because it also allowed him to be his 'own *owner*'.

I was curious to pin down the wispy tenets of freedom and ownership Surya claimed he felt during *thozil.* I asked him to tell me more about what he meant during one of his rest breaks. Initially, to my question, Surya only responded with a stern statement about his job at the L&T shipbuilding yard. Beyond the preliminary dealings with contractors and sub-contractors that sat underneath accessing such work in Ennore, – Surya conceding again that he was lucky to have bypassed such dealings for his job at L&T –, he expressed considerable resentment towards the fact that he was managed by a company *karaan*. And then, almost defeatedly in response to his own statements, he added:

> "But everything here is a *company* [in English]. Without a *contract* [in English] you cannot do anything".

"Does the temporariness of the L&T *contract* [in English] worry you?", I then asked.

At first, Surya expressed some indifference towards my question, muttering that it really did not bother him that much that his own work position at L&T was only provisional. Then, he seemed to give it more thought, and offered me the example of his father (then deceased) and brother. They had both been offered permanent positions at TANGEDCO, as a part of the government's compensation scheme when the first set of power plants were built over their ancestral land. Surya himself had been excluded from the compensation offer, as it was only accessible to the first two male members of a relocated family.

> "But it is good I didn't get it", Surya added. "I don't think I am suited for that kind of work."

About his father, Surya said that he was one of the first of TANGEDCO employees originally from Kuppam[16], and that he had perennially expressed considerable regret for having accepted the government's relocation scheme: their lives would have been better off if

[16] Along with Pandian, whom we meet in Chapter 1.

only he had refused to sign the deal, if they had kept their land and remained fishermen, Surya recalled his father telling him repeatedly. It had troubled his father till his death, Surya later murmured.

His brother, Surya went on after, was currently employed in one of TANGEDCO's city offices. Initially, he had only been given an entry level position, as a helper, for he had not completed the entirety of his school education. He had thought of leaving many times but was dissuaded by his family: holding onto a government job, Surya insisted, came with a reputation that offered some forms privilege to one's family and relations, a privilege that was rare to come across.[17] So, Surya's brother had stayed on, and after many years, had earned his first promotion. As Surya said:

> "You can move up like that. From *helper* to *lineman* to *foreman* [all, in English]. Your salary will also increase, but you need to be used to that life."

Captivated, I quickly asked Surya what sort of "life" it was that one had to get "used to". Clasping his hands still, laying them stiff by the sides of his body, he told me that it was a life where you simply remained "seated", motionless until "you were summoned by a *company karaan*".

> "My brother has become a *company karaan*", he said. "But inside, we both know, he is still a fisherman".

Either calling him to complain about his work or asking him about his catch when they got the chance to speak for longer periods of time, Surya told me that his brother's permanent position came with many benefits, but there was still something that went amiss. Solemnly, and almost as in response to his brother's predicament, he added:

> "Before, our *thozil* was only *permanent* [in English]. But now we do not know. Now, even with *thozil*, you need a *contract* [in English]."

Here, Velu's passionate response to Surya's story struck me. He added that when TANGEDCO offered a few fishermen, him included, short term contracts for some construction work at the power plant, they scoffed at the supposed income they were to receive. The rate of pay was so meagre that that it did not even compare to what he could earn in one day with *thozil* if he came back with a favourable catch. But the money was only

[17] Scholars (see Jeffrey 2010, Hull 2013 & Jauregui 2016) have made a similar point in other contexts across South Asia, speaking about the access to state pensions and better eligibility for marriage as being some of the privileges accessed through government jobs.

one aspect. What was most important was that he would prefer to remain his 'own *owner*' at any cost than "become a coolie for the government". With his *thozil*, at the very least, he added, he knew he would experience some fulfilment on the 'inside', pointing to his body like Surya had when I asked him a similar question. With *thozil* the fishermen only listened to themselves, confirmed Velu, insisting that if they came back with nothing else but a 'sore' and 'bruised body', there was still a sense of contentment that he found hard to explain.

> "But what to do now?", Velu defeatedly submitted at the end. Echoing Surya's statement, he too muttered: "Even with our *thozil* we need *coolie velai*."

Thozil as freedom

Caught within Surya and Velu's declarations, I argue, was the ambivalence that arose from wanting to resist the steady industrialisation of their landscape, while, simultaneously, having little other choice but to participate in Ennore's fluctuating labour market. In Surya's case in particular, like his father who later regretted having accepted the government's relocation offers, and his brother who half-heartedly held on to the benefits of a company *karaan* while battling a substantial sense of identity loss, he too was similarly overcome by the uncertainties that arose from accepting a temporary position of coolie work that he considered repugnant yet necessary. In other words, underlying his incertitude, I argue, was his relationship with the "shifting characteristics of labour" (Bear 2015) that unfolded with the advancement of industrial capital in Ennore. As Velu too bemoaned – *even with our thozil we need contract work*. These new relationships of labour, like coolie and contract work, allowed for uneasy distances to stand between them and the "affective histories" that ratified their identities as fishermen. And as a result, the embodied practice of *thozil* offered both Surya and Velu an ability to rekindle those very relationships, thereby reinvigorating their ability to be fishermen amidst the companies' expansions in Ennore, allowing for forms of 'freedom' and 'ownership' to manifest inside them.

To make this argument more effective, I build on Dipesh Chakrabarty's (2000) suggestion that capitalist transitions are best understood as unfolding unevenly across different geographies in ways that require us to examine the porous and conflicting histories of "human belonging" that interrupt, transform and resist its supposed universal unfolding. In other words, Chakrabarty suggests that transitions into capitalism are simultaneously always processes of "translation" where the politics of historical difference interacts with and

modifies the universal category of capital at any given point. This, in turn, allows for plural histories of capital to exist across any given landscape, thereby, leaving it the task of the researcher to examine the ways in which diverse politics of human belonging interact with and interrupt capital's universal and recursive logic. And, thinking through Chakrabarty's suggestion, I submit that one way in which the freedom and ownership Surya claimed to experience with *thozil* arose from the fishermen's interactions with certain analytical histories of capital. Specifically, Surya, I argue, after having encountered the uneasy abstraction of his bodily labour during coolie work, where he felt a distance emerge between him and the subjective histories that came attached with his body's capacity to labour, purposefully engaged in *thozil* in an attempt to revitalise those very histories.

In specific, what I'm suggesting is that Surya, in his own ways, recognised that his work at L&T – his coolie work – reduced his bodily labour to a lifeless, insensible and transferable category of "abstract labour" (Marx 1980), thereby, diminishing, according to him, his capacity to labour to a sterile set of actions and company *karaan* instructions. His *thozil*, on the other hand, became the site of bodily reinvigoration wherein he revived what went missing during coolie work. This would then mean that freedom and ownership developed from Surya's purposeful reengagement with *thozil* after coolie work. However, to furnish this argument in more detail, I believe it is necessary to summarise the analytical category of 'abstract labour' first. Here too, I follow Dipesh Chakrabarty's (2000) examination of what is otherwise Karl Marx's (1980) theoretical category.

In *Provincializing Europe* (2000) Chakrabarty examines Marx's writings on 'abstract labour' and suggests that Marx leaves provision for a determinant called *life* that problematizes capital's recursive logic. First, Chakrabarty suggests that the abstraction of human labour is instrumental to and the precursor of the logic of capital, meaning that abstract labour is fundamental to the existence of capital in itself. Here, abstract labour means the reduction of human or living labour to an objective physiological output (like the body), while, simultaneously, classifying this objective reduction as an incorporeal phenomenon that is somehow void of the human in pursuit of capitalist exchange. Moreover, the processes of abstraction "precedes one's conscious recognition of its existence", meaning that this process is almost concealed and the societies who come to realize this phenomenon slowly enforce disciplinary processes that then sets into motion a capitalist mode of production. However, as stated, the 'abstraction' of human or living labour may not solely apply in human terms. Thus, within a capitalist mode of production, capital absorbs abstract labour into itself by

reducing the workers capacity to labour into a transferable phenomenon, leaving the living or *life* that it first incorporates as indispensable, concurrently, outside of it.

> "The critical point is that the labour that is abstracted in the capitalist's search for a common measure of human activity is *living*. Marx would ground resistance to capital in this apparently mysterious factor called *life*." (Chakrabarty 2000: 60) (Emphasis mine)

Thus, while the capitalist mode of production begins with the abstraction of living labour into transferable and objectified phenomenon, attempting to leave the *life* that is associated with bodily labour outside of capital's cycle of reproduction, then the logic of capital only reveals itself as contradictory. While on the one hand the recursive logic of capital finds commencement in the abstraction of living labour into objectified lifeless labour, on the other, it warrants a consistent need for living labour to sustain this very process of abstraction. Extending this further, while the process of abstraction supports capital's objective of the emancipation of the category labour altogether, for Marx, capital's inherent contradiction would simultaneously reveal itself in the worker's consciousness, and thereby, advance the untimely defeat (and reimagination) of the category 'capital' altogether.

I have only offered a brief summary of Chakrabarty's reading of Marx's work for clarification. I wish to draw focus to the argument that the *life* that is linked to the category of labour is what becomes a source of conflict for capitalist abstraction. In application of this analytical reading of 'abstract labour' to the example I forward with Surya, I suggest that the *life* that coolie work attempted to exclude from his body were the intimate narratives of belonging that ratified his relationship with his landscape as a fisherman. And, in extension, in experiencing the clinical distancing of these affective narratives from his capacity to labour at L&T, Surya deliberately engaged in *thozil* in an effort to foreground what had only found exclusion. And, by doing so, he not only distanced his distaste for having engaged in coolie work, but, simultaneously, also reaffirmed his ability to be a male fisher. There was a sense of 'freedom' in this process of reinvigoration.

Simultaneously, his *thozil* also allowed him to experience the unison of life and labour with his body by shifting the processes of abstraction from the hands of the companies and the company *karaans* during coolie" work, into his own. It was by wading through the water (See Figure 7), by dragging the nets onto the boat (See Figure 8), by patiently segregating the catch with astute concentration (See Figure 9), I suggest, that Surya found the relative freedom to decide how to bind his bodily labour to the rationales of investments and returns

that were intrinsic to his *thozil*. He could see, feel, hear and smell his bodily labour every step of the way – making *thozil* a moment of abstracting one's own labour through practice. While his *thozil* was also built on a logic of capital, and in essence abstracted his living labour into objectified labour, it offered the fishermen the ability to recognise and decide when the *life* that came attached to their bodily labour was essential to capital's reproduction and when that *life* stood outside of it. There was a *freedom* in the fishermen's ability to make that decision. In other words, Surya and Velu were, during their *thozil*, the *owners* of their own labour.

Freedom through mediation

Simultaneously, however, while Surya had spoken of 'freedom' to mark a contrast with the current sense of coercion that he felt on a daily basis, suggesting that it stemmed from his bodily practice of *thozil*, nestled within his statements, I argue, was another way in which the freedom he claimed he felt, manifested. In this section, I also want to show that Surya's desire for freedom, and his sense that *thozil* held the means to quench this desire (if only momentarily and partially), were in fact made urgent *because* of the current circumstances under which his landscape unfolded. With the imposition of coal and of the power plants throughout Ennore, I suggest that Surya found himself caught between multiple forms of labour: the *thozil* that was tied to his fisherman identity, the treacherous necessity of contract work, the ambiguous appeal of permanent positions as a company *karaan*, and even new forms of river-based work that somehow distorted *thozil* itself. And, driven to navigate and mediate between the benefits and harms that different positions and different forms of labour afforded the fishermen, Surya defiantly claimed that he placed freedom above all other forms of value that his labour could yield – be it security, capital or status.

Thus, I argue, Surya's deliberate pursual of *thozil* after coolie work (both understood as forms of embodied labour) can also be conceptualised as what Laura Bear (2014a) calls 'labour': forms of "mediating action" in the world. For Bear, labour in contemporary capitalist economies is best understood as the creative potential of people to suture the multiple discrepant socio-temporal rhythms that make up and constitute what is often otherwise glossed over as the unfolding of "capitalist time". In her later work (2015), Bear advances this point by showing how boatmen and marine workers in India, who performed manual labour in a government owned port that was facing the effects of shifting sovereign debt policies, saw their labour as simultaneously interacting with different social, ethical and

religious domains of their lives. Engaging with their labour in this way allowed the boatmen and workers to make sense of and mediate the anxious pulls of austerity that encircled them. From religious rituals to regenerate the natural properties of the river, to forms of situated knowledge that helped the workers navigate the dangerous tides of the river when on duty, their labour involved a mediation of these otherwise disparate domains allowing them to articulate (sometimes misleadingly) and deal with the unevenness of modern austerity capitalism. Quite simply, Bear shows how this mediation work also afforded creative means and methods by which people attempted to reconcile, to their advantage, the numerous conflicts that arose with the unfolding of modern capitalist time, and its interactions with the myriad other temporal rhythms that simultaneously come to fashion the world.

Drawing on Bear's proposition, I too consider the fishermen's labour as a mediating action that engaged with and "encountered the material world" (Bear 2014a) they lived in. My use of "labour", I repeat, does not equate with the fishermen's *thozil* in this instance. Instead, labour, here, points at the grinding work of sorting through the multiple possibilities and dead ends that made up the job market for Kuppam's fishermen – with their changing *thozil* coexisting alongside multiple other forms of work. Through the labour of navigating the benefits and pitfalls of contract work, *thozil*, or permanent positions at the companies, the fishermen both confronted the anxieties that industrial transformation caused in them, and sutured together a range of times and rhythms whereby capital could circulate through and around them. When such mediatory practices worked to their benefit, like it did for Surya that night on the boat, there was a similar sense of freedom that manifested. In other words, the freedom and ownership Surya possessed during *thozil* also stemmed from his mediating of two distinct practices of embodied labour in Ennore. I offer a final example to illustrate this point.

Soon after Surya told me why he had joined Velu after his shift at L&T, he pointed to the NCTPS plant and explained that the government port he had previously worked at stood right behind the power plant's eastern boundary. Though accessible by boat from where we were in the river, the backwaters by the port were restricted grounds for the fishermen as it fell within the confines of state-owned property. But during his brief spell of coolie work at the port, he insisted that he used to sneak in some string and bait and fish in those controlled waters. When I asked him why he had done that, knowing very well that there would have been significant consequences if he was caught fishing, Surya told me that it not only brought him immense "satisfaction" to defy the company *karaan*, but also amplified in him the

excitement of engaging in a practice that he considered his *own* – patting his chest while he told me so.

His father, on many occasions, had told him about the types of fish those grounds offered, Surya even recalling having accompanied him as a young boy to fish there before the port was sanctioned. During his time as a contractual stevedore, he had in fact caught a few prized sea fish, snuck them out of the port, and sold them in the local market through a friend of his. There was money to be made there, Surya added, expressing some disappointment in the fact that the port had cordoned off those parts of his landscape. But most importantly, the fishing, he claimed, also "cooled" his head. It allowed him to brush away the bodily monotony of "loading and unloading" various shipments at the port; a repetitive cycle that he found all too "boring", especially given he was on a temporary contract. It parallelly emptied the drone of his "supervisor's voice" from "inside his head"; giving him the chance to feel occasional satisfaction in a job he otherwise vehemently disliked. It allowed him, quite simply, to be a fisherman again. As he said:

> "That is why I came today as well, after L&T. Because I can do it. Because I am a fisherman."

Layered within Surya's story, I argue, was the need to engage with his landscape as a fisherman. He did this by shuttling between coolie work and *thozil* – what I have termed Surya's mediatory actions or his 'labour'. Importantly, as I have shown here, there was a freedom in Surya's ability to switch between contract work and *thozil* whenever he could. And, by doing so, he managed to counter his distaste for having participated in coolie work, where, as I have also shown, he faced an erosion of the affective narratives and histories that came linked with his *thozil*. By fishing during his contract job, he not only briefly believed he countered the company's rapid expansion in his landscape, nor did he just "cool" himself down by temporarily muting the company *karaan's* voice from inside his head, but, he, also, engaged with the subjective histories that informed some of ways in which he related to his landscape – allowing for the memories of his father to mingle and inform his capacity to labour, and, more importantly, whenever possible, profit from it.

In summary, in this section I have discussed how Surya's claim of feeling *free* and being his own *owner* found expression through the bodily practice of *thozil*, thereby, allowing him to reinvigorate his identity as a fisherman amidst the companies' expansions in Ennore.

Additionally, I have also uncovered how the freedom and ownership Surya claimed he felt emerged from the careful shuttling between coolie work and *thozil*. In other words, this act of mediation, of creatively suturing different forms of embodied labour amidst the complex unfolding of industrial capital in Ennore, was another means by which the fishermen felt *free* in their shifting landscape.

However, to solely think of *thozil* and the ability for the fishermen to shuttle between *thozil* and coolie work as being their antidote to the companies' expansion in their landscape would offer a limited perspective to the extent to which the companies had actually taken over 'everything'. As suggested in the opening vignette to this chapter, *thozil* also appeared to erode the fishermen's ability to be 'fishermen'. Thus, in the last section, I examine this aspect of *thozil* by uncovering Velu and Surya's claim that the fishermen, despite practicing their *thozil*, had little other choice but to regularly partake in coolie work. While it is perhaps already clear that the companies increased industrial activity in Ennore only hindered the fishermen's ability to fish in Ennore's polluted waters, pushing them to access other forms of temporary work in the industries that surrounded them to maintain a feasible income, I uncover a different phenomenon that troubled the fishermen about the extents to which the companies had made their encroachments. In the next section, I show how *thozil* itself was being turned into a form of coolie work.

Mining for *poochi*

At daybreak, when Velu, Surya and I reached the docks of Kuppam, we met another fisherman named Ramesh, standing by the shore of the river. As Velu and Surya began unloading their nets and catch from their boat, Ramesh asked me:

"Tell me man, what did you learn tonight?"

To his question, I told Ramesh that I had finally seen the immense amount of bodily work that made up their practice of *thozil* and added that I had learnt so much given that the subject of their *thozil* had up until then only remained a topic of conversation. Ramesh scoffed at my response and loudly proclaimed that what I had learnt was insignificant.

> "Around us, there are so many problems! That it seems you have not learnt. Nowadays they are turning our *thozil* itself into *coolie* work. That is what you must understand."

A few weeks after Ramesh had told me it was their thozil that was being turned into coolie work, I got to Kuppam after having heard from an activist friend of mine that the fishers had staged a protest against the increasing number of private prawn farm owners who were using their river to catch *poochi* or river worms. I had called Velu to confirm this and when I got to Kuppam, asked him if the fisherman had in fact staged a big a *porattam* (protest).

> "It was not a *porattam*!", Velu snapped back. "It became a proper *piraccanai* [problem, trouble]!"

In insisting that their protest was better off understood as a *piracannai*, I understood that Velu was in fact telling me that the proceedings of the protest had turned hostile. The police had intervened, some of fishermen had turned aggressive in response, and a few of the protestors were even put into lockup for the night.

Velu then told me I had to see what mining for *poochi* actually meant. Taking me to the river, pointing to the groups of men that were immersed by floating planks of wood on the surface of the river, he insisted that many of Kuppam's fishermen had no choice but to take up such work given that their income from *thozil* had grown increasingly scarce.

As we got on to a small paddleboat and reached a group of fishermen in the water, Velu detailed the entire the process of mining for *poochi* to me. One fisherman dived down to the bed of the river and collected a large block of mud with his hands. The mud, often caked with the ash deposits that entered the river, was brought to the surface and laid aboard the wooden plank. The fishermen who remained afloat by the plank, shuffled through the mud, breaking it down with water from the river, collecting all the worms that nestled within the caked mud. The worms were then stored separately in a small clay pot, and the process was repeated all over again. The reader can use this link to watch the process of mining for *poochi*.

Velu, then, pointing to a man on the shore of the river who was dressed in a white shirt and long grey trousers, told me that he paid the fishermen by the hour for the work. The owner of a large number of private prawn farms a few kilometres north of Ennore, Velu explained that the man collected all the worms that were caught, dried them in his farm and used them as prawn feed.

> "They should not allow this business", Velu complained. "It affects our *thozil* badly. You must understand. our *thozil* also depends on these *poochi*. The prawns we catch also eat the worms. If you take them away, then what is left for us in this river? You think the prawns will come back? I'm telling you, nothing will be there for us."

Velu, thereafter, went on to make a few points in quick succession. He insisted that the man with the white shirt was nothing else but a company *karaan*. The man with the white shirt was backed by significant political clout, just like the power plants and the other companies in Ennore, and Velu exclaimed that all that concerned the man was his desire to turn a profit. The fact that the prawns in the river fed of the same worms the man demanded, the fact that the fishermen's livelihoods were linked to the prawns in turn, none of it seemed to concern the man. A few years earlier, Velu went on, some of the fishermen took up the work of mining for *poochi* during the off season to supplement their income. Now, however, there were more private prawn farms in the area and many fishermen were taking up the work to offset a considerably hampered *thozil*, causing significant conflicts amongst the fishermen in Kuppam.

> "Like this", Velu said, going on to repeat what I was told earlier, "there will be nothing here for us. Like this, they are changing our *thozil* itself into *coolie* work. What else do you think they're doing?"

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Mining for *poochi*, thus, in so many ways, was nothing other than coolie work for the fishermen. Yet, problematically, it uneasily bordered their *thozil* as well. In specific, while mining for *poochi* necessitated working under someone like a company karaan, thereby delinking the fishermen's ability to be their own owners, it also demanded that the fishermen use their river for the purpose. This aggravated the fishermen's anxieties on many counts as it put "disparate temporal rhythms" and form of capital accumulation into conflict in ways they had not experienced before. When the fishermen mined the river for *poochis*, the hourly rate of pay resembled the kinds of temporary work they had to take on to supplement their income from *thozil*. In other words, it resembled, to some account, Surya's experiences of coolie work at L&T. However, the fact that they were using their bodies in that hour to scavenge for worms in their river, knowing very well that this hampered the specific temporal and ecological evaluations that underlay their *thozil* – working against the prawn breeding cycles that were linked to the river's own seasonal fluxes; taking away crucial features of the river's ecological makeup – advanced the notion that it was their own *thozil*, and therefore, their very selves, that was eroding by being in the water.

In tandem, *poochi* work brewed significant conflicts within the fishers of Kuppam. Amongst them it brought into contest rights over the river, the ways in which they used their

bodies in it, and the extent to which they themselves allowed the companies and the company *karaan* to take over their landscape – knowing very well that by doing so, there would be nothing left for them in Ennore. 'Just like that', with the unfolding of this landscape of coal, with the companies' holding greater influence over their river, significantly altering Ennore's labour relations in tandem, many of the fishermen felt they were not going to be fishermen for much longer. The companies were everywhere, Velu and Surya had lamented, and they were turning the fishermen into coolies in their own homes.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have discussed how *thozil* simultaneously diluted and reinforced the fishermen's fishing identities amidst Ennore's industrial expansions. I have done so by examining two separate claims that Velu and Surya made.

At first, I looked into Surya's declaration that, after a long shift of coolie work in one of Ennore's many companies, he felt *free* and like his own *owner* during *thozil*. I have shown how the 'freedom' and 'ownership' Surya claimed he felt, fostered in two distinct ways. On the one hand, Surya's ability to feel *free* and be his own *owner* expressed itself through the bodily practice of *thozil*. With the unfolding of industrial capital in Ennore, *thozil* offered the fishermen the ability to merge certain affective narratives and personal histories with their embodied labour in ways that other forms of work, like coolie work, did not permit. Thus, by deliberately engaging in *thozil* after coolie work, Surya sought and experienced this feeling of freedom and ownership.

Simultaneously, I have also shown that the freedom Surya felt developed from his ability to mediate Ennore's job market. By holding on to coolie work, knowing very well that income was a matter of necessity for him and his family, Surya shuttled between his job at L&T and *thozil* whenever possible in a bid to reinvigorate his identity as a fisherman. This act of mediation in itself, of moving between coolie work and *thozil*, was a source of 'freedom' for Surya. In other ways, these were the ways in which the fishermen became and remained fishermen in their landscape.

In the last section of this chapter I have more closely examined Velu's statement that the fishermen were becoming "coolies just like that". I have focused on the practice of mining for *poochi* and have detailed how the embodied labour attached to mining for *poochi*

balefully linked *thozil* and coolie work. The hourly rate of pay, the system of hierarchy that reached up to a company *karaan*, the need to work in the river, only amplified Velu's, and many other fishermen's, fears that it was *thozil* itself that being turned into a form of coolie work. While this caused him an anxiety of becoming a coolie just like that, it also supported his belief that the companies had taken 'everything' in Ennore.

While this concludes Part 1 of the thesis, in Part 2, I continue examining the precarious relations of labour that many held on to with the power plants in Ennore through my interactions with a senior union leader called Sundaram.

Part 2. *Piraccanai* (pi-ruch-in-nai)

In Part 2, I follow Sundaram, a senior working committee member at the Centre for Indian Trade Unions (CITU) – the trade union wing of the Communist Part of India (Marxist) – and grapple with his ability to engage with the density of governmental illegalities which intersected with people's lives and livelihoods in Ennore's landscape of coal. By doing so, I attend to Sundaram's proficiency at mediating the range of uncertain relations that various people and groups held with the government, in ways that could yield equal measures of benefit and harm. I also pay attention to the places in which this mediation fell short, and where other kinds of political action arose, advancing a unique politics of perceptibility in Ennore.

Chapter 3 focuses on the *piraccanai* or "trouble" that, according to Sundaram, was to be found throughout Ennore as governmental practices triggered chains of effects. Those forms of *piraccanai*, I later show, were generated not only by the government, but also by charismatic actors like Sundaram, as they navigated and acted tactically in the landscape of coal.

Chapter 4 stays with Sundaram but shifts it focus from the content of the governmental practices and illegalities that floated in Ennore's landscape of coal, to attend to the aesthetic and political effects of his playing with the government's 'limit' of tolerating dissent.

■ கோரிக்கைகளை வலியுறுத்தி, ஆர்ப்பாட்டத்தில் ஈடுபட்ட, வடசென்னை, அனல் மின் நிலைய ஊழியர்கள்.

Figure 11. A cutting from the news report Sundaram sent me on WhatsApp. These were the protests CITU had organised outside the gates of the NCTPS after three employees were transferred for demanding the issuance of identity cards for temporary workers.

Chapter 3: "I fight for the people of Ennore"

"Where all the *piracannai* begins"

The first time I met Sundaram, I was ashamedly late. Standing outside the gates of the NCTPS, a copy of a Tamil and English language newspaper tucked under his arms, he appeared to be in his early sixties, his greying hair parted smartly on the side, an immaculate shirt matching a pair of freshly ironed trousers. He walked over to me as I parked my motorcycle by the edge of the road, and he greeted me with an infectious enthusiasm. Seeming unconcerned by my lateness, he instead scanned me through his spectacles and expressed his curiosity about what I was conducting my research on, dispelling my apologies with a firm wave of his hand. He had known, he stated, that I had gotten his phone number from Sriram, a city-based environmental activist, but was mildly preoccupied when I had called him the previous day, such that he had missed out on some of the details of what I had said. I explained again that my research project was about the TANGEDCO power plants, and, more specifically, that I was examining the accusations and discourses of illegal practices and corruption that circulated around their operations in Ennore. I also told him that I was grateful for him being okay with me joining him that morning, reiterating that I was keen on knowing more about his union's activities in the region – adding, playfully, that the CITU posters that were plastered across Ennore were only difficult to miss.

Breaking into a feisty chuckle, Sundaram's sole response was to ask me if I knew what the total electricity generation capacity installed in Tamil Nadu was. I gave him an estimate that fell well short of the actual number.

> "It is 17000 megawatts" he said in an exaggerated tone. "The money it takes to create even one megawatt is in the crores [ten million]. That's where it all starts. That's where all the *piracannai* begins."

Wanting to tell me more, Sundaram instead answered his phone which had begun blaring a garish tune midway. The previous day, when I had called him about setting up a meeting, he had told me that he was to "settle" a labour conflict in Ennore the next morning and, somewhat surprisingly, had accepted my request to join him for the negotiations. On the phone by the gates, he was discussing the logistics of the meeting that was to follow, pushing for the person on the other line to gather as many people as they possibly could before they arrived on site. It was important that they did, he added, eagerly pacing the side of the road, gesticulating heavily as he attempted to reiterate his point.

As Sundaram continued to speak on the phone, I introduced myself to the two men who stood behind him, recognising, by their demeanour, that they were associates of his. One of them, Ganesh, was also a salaried CITU representative who was there to assist Sundaram at the meeting. The other man, Prakash, told me he was just a regular member, and, funnily enough, joined Ganesh as his assistant. Did they know what the labour conflict was about, I then asked, receiving rather apprehensive responses from them both in return. It was a "local matter", they said, something that was fairly routine in the region, they then added, looking away uncomfortably, preferring for an obstinate silence to quickly grow amongst us.

I withdrew from asking Prakash and Ganesh any more questions, acknowledging that their discomfort with my presence was substantial. Waiting for Sundaram to conclude his phone call, I instead stood and watched as a large group of construction workers queued up by the gates of the NCTPS, hurriedly making their way past the security guards after having been fully frisked and their cards stamped in approval. A few workers had simultaneously also exited the power plant from a smaller side gate, eyeing us as they sipped cups of tea at a makeshift shop by the road. Surrounding the gates of the NCTPS, I noted, were large political hoardings venerating successive Tamil Nadu governments for their efforts in completing different phases of the power plant; the photographs of male politicians taking up a disproportionate amount of space in the poster's overall designs. When Sundaram finished his phone call, telling the three of us that it was time to leave, he asked me if he could ride with me on my bike to the meeting site, to which I agreed, and then, proceeded to make a humorous remark about how all the political posters had been put up even before the power plants had found commission.

> "All these workers are here to finish 'Phase 3' of that power plant. But the poster is already there congratulating the government for their efforts. But for the workers, nothing is there. Nothing at all! This is how it work here. In Ennore, this is a big *piracannai*."

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Sundaram claimed that Ennore was filled with all sorts of *piraccanai* – a Tamil word that translates into English as either 'problem' or 'trouble'. In this chapter, I focus on the ways by which Sundaram moved between mapping out *piraccanai* in Ennore, to deploying *piraccanai* as a tactic of his own. In mapping out *piraccanai* and pinpointing its causes, I argue that Sundaram was assessing how governmental practices, especially in relation to

labour relations, intersected with people's livelihoods across Ennore's landscape of coal. In parallel, I found that Sundaram was also active in amplifying, subsiding, or even causing his own acts of *piracannai.* At times, as I describe in this chapter, he even succeeded in pushing TANGEDCO and a few other companies in Ennore to comply with labour legislation, while making relentless attempts to negotiate fair rates of compensation for workers facing untimely terminations, sometimes even rallying for the regularisation of long-term employees on fixed-term contracts. By tactically mapping, harnessing and curating *piraccanai* in select situations, I want to show how Sundaram made bids to navigate the fraught governmental practices that permeated Ennore's labour relations, as the government itself interfered with the limits between the 'legal' and the 'illegal'.

To begin, I continue describing the events that followed on from my first meeting with Sundaram.

Mapping out *piraccanai*

As we stood by the gates of the NCTPS, I grew curious and eager to know more about Sundaram's meeting that day, wanting to make sense of how it intersected with what he called "a big *piraccanai* in Ennore". Eventually, as we began following Ganesh and Prakash on their motorbike ahead of us, I got the chance to ask Sundaram if he could tell me more about the conflict he was to help 'settle', hoping, also, to be mildly prepared for what was to come.

At first, Sundaram only submitted that Ennore's local populations hardly ever received employment opportunities at the power plants despite them having lost either their lands or their livelihoods for its construction. He reiterated what Velu and Surya had also told me[18], that TANGEDCO tied up with a range of contractors and subcontractors that brought in workers from other states in India – like the construction workers we had seen enter and exit the gates of the NCTPS (See Figure 12) – referring to them collectively as *hindi karaan* [Hindi men][19]. Then, as we crossed a bridge[20], and followed the large sets of corroded ash

[18] See Chapter 2.
[19] *Hindi karaan* is colloquial Tamil term that literally translates to 'Hindi-man' and which many Tamil speakers laxly use to refer to non-Tamil speaking populations from India's northern, central and eastern states. In this particular case, Sundaram had used the term to refer to the vast number of migrant workers (mainly from Northern states) who came to Ennore to aid the construction of the power plants. However, in the rest of this chapter, and thesis, I use the term "migrant worker" instead of *hindi karaan*, unless until I am quoting any of my informants directly, given that there is always a great deal of variety as to the provenance of those people.
[20] The same one Velu and I would later sit under, in Chapter 2.

pipes that ran perpendicular to the NCTPS, Sundaram lamented that the influx of migrant workers had only instigated considerable tensions in the region, pushing many local men to protest their presence.

> "But the *hindi karaan* are just poor workers from other places who are here", Sundaram lamented. "They are being blamed for something which is not their fault. Tell me, if you sit here and do *coolie* work every day, with half your money going to one *sub-contractor* [in English], can I really say you came and stole my job? It is TANGEDCO, the *principal contractors* [in English], and the way they do business which is the problem. In Ennore, there are so many *piracannai* that I must explain to you properly."

Figure 12. A long queue of workers standing by the construction site of the NCTPS phase 3, waiting for their identity cards to be checked by the private security personnel manned at every entry/exit gate.

Then, as we took a sharp right, continuing to follow the ash pipes on the last stretches of available tarmac, watching as gigantic hills of caked ash rose above us on either side, feeling the putrid stench of something chemical cloud our senses, Sundaram patted me on the

shoulder and pointed to the skeletal figure of the under construction TANGEDCO SEZ power plant in the far distance. That was where the meeting was going to take place, he confirmed. But to know more about the particularities of the meeting, Sundaram insisted that I first be familiar with the dealings that preceded the plant's construction, summing up, in short bursts, a timeline of previous events.

First, after TANGEDCO drew up plans for the construction of the new plant, initially having confirmed the availability of land and later nailed down sources of funding, an official tender was floated inviting construction companies to take on the entire building process. The winning bid fell in the hands of a central government owned engineering and manufacturing enterprise called Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited (BHEL). After a brief survey period where BHEL and TANGEDCO finalised a construction timeline, BHEL began outsourcing some of their labour requirements to a vast set of subcontractors – a common practice given that BHEL did not have the internal labour force to initiate the building processes on their own and largely stuck to overlooking the design and construction phases with their team of engineers and managerial staff.

Sundaram then told me about the networks of subcontractors who stood atop Ennore's labour relations, distributing temporary contracts to local populations – often in exchange for a commission, a practice that was in violation of labour and anti-corruption laws. Such temporary contract positions were by law designed to include a small range of protective measures for workers – despite their legislative protection being far weaker as that of the regular, company positions. Yet, as Sundaram explained, TANGEDCO, their principal contractors, and the array of subcontractors that operated below them, often skirted around mandated labour legislation, withholding salaries, denying workers mandatory safety equipment and even prematurely terminating the contracts of temporary workers in deference of due procedure.

As Sundaram further bemoaned, one contractor always meant that there was a string of subcontractors operating at various levels below the principal agent, and this was precisely what prompted the conflict that led up to the meeting we would be attending that day. BHEL had handed a labour contract to a large employment agency that had in turn subcontracted a small "piling"[21] work contract with a requirement of seventeen men in total to a local subcontractor. The subcontractor had employed the seventeen men from a village in Ennore,

[21] "Piling" work, as I understood it, is the work linked to constructing support columns for big projects.

but, earlier that same week, BHEL had prematurely terminated the contracts of nine of the workers, telling the men that they were free to decide amongst themselves who could stay on. The subcontractor who had employed the men, insisted that there was nothing he could do about the situation and later began ignoring the men's repeated pleas for finding a more amicable resolution, amplifying the rumour amongst the men that they were being replaced by a new influx of migrant workers.

And it was here where Sundaram came into the picture, from his own account. He confirmed to me that the termination of the men's contracts was a legal violation, as BHEL was in fact required to give the men a notice period. Moreover, Sundaram was aware that BHEL had also not paid out the remainder of the men's contracts, or offered a fee of compensation, another illegal practice. Here he widened the scope of his accusation, bellowing that many in Ennore fell victim to the illegal processes that marked countless TANGEDCO-related transactions.

In a determined tone, Sundaram then equated his commitments to the people of Ennore to that of a group of environmental activists – a team[22] that had brought to public attention a range of illegal and fraudulent practices that TANGEDCO had administered to get their power plants running in Ennore. He also compared his actions to those of anti-corruption activists – such as a group who uncovered incongruous financial scams in TANGEDCO's purchase of imported coal – as he too was there to challenge the state company's penchant for breaking the law, representing those who fell victim to Ennore's nefarious labour market. Then, as we began riding over a large ash ridden landfill, witnessing endless mounds of grey merge with the hazy blues of an infiltrated skyline[23], Sundaram told me CITU's success in the region was unparalleled when compared to other trade unions operating in Ennore. As we bounced on and off the seat of the motorbike, feeling the heat, dirt and stench swarm around us, Sundaram proudly proclaimed:

"Fighting TANGEDCO, that is only my *duty* [in English]".

[22] We have met them in the Introduction, and will meet them again in Chapter 5.

[23] I was later told that we were in fact riding over the ash pond of the NCTPS. An ash pond is a large, engineered basin designed to hold coal combustion products of thermal power plants. Highly toxic, causing extreme ecological damage to the land it is built over, the fact that TANGEDCO was building a new power plant over the ash pond of an existing one drew the eyes of many. At the time of my fieldwork, the power plant was under review for a violation of its environmental clearance certificate and was later given the green light to continue construction. The ash pond features centrally in Chapter 5.

Figure 13. The ash road that led up to the under construction TANGEDCO power plant in the distance. It was a dicey ride, worsened by pools of water that stagnated in lower ground with the late October rains.

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Sundaram's claims about the *piracannai* that brewed around the power plants and disrupted workers' lives and livelihoods were layered in accusations according to which public employers (BHEL and TANGEDCO) and private contractors routinely violated their employees' legal and contractual rights. And yet, Sundaram himself professed those scathing claims as a union leader, a highly fraught position, given the multiple ways in which unions in contemporary India have themselves been accused of corruption and illegal practices. A number of political anthropologists have indeed delved into the webs of corruption, illegality and crime that surround labour relations across public and private industries in India (Parry 2020, 2013, 2009; Sanchez 2017; Cross 2014; Chari 2004). In doing so, they have described how industrial production heavily relies on the interplay and separation between regularised work and short-term contracted work in ways that echoed the situation I witnessed around TANGEDCO's coal-fired thermal power plants. Simultaneously, some of these scholars have

also drawn their attention to unions and their leaders[24], describing their practices as being similarly tangled in legal violations or as generally serving the purposes of the government or upper management.

Drawing on long-term research on labour relations in a government-owned industrial steel plant in Chhattisgarh, Jonathan Parry (2020, 2013 & 2009) has evidenced the reliance of governmental industries on networks of private contractors and sub-contractors to stock their labour force, even showing how trade unions have maintained and aided this relationship. He first reveals that, despite legal requirement that "workers who do routinely necessary jobs should have regular employment contracts", the plant's management "has consistently circumvented [the law] and increasingly employed contract labour in operational tasks" through a range subcontracting practices (2013: 371). These subcontracting practices, Parry claims, accelerated after the liberalization of the Indian economy – "such that, over the past twenty-five years, the country's regular workforce has been reduced by half, making way for cheaper, more flexible and more manageable contract workers" (2013:372). But despite the increased precarity that came attached to worker livelihoods through such subcontracting practices, classically a position where unions have been known to intervene in a bid to unsettle state hegemony and capital interests by furthering class struggle, Parry shows how the unions in Chhattisgarh acted contrarily. This was exemplified by the practice of influential unions, – the "pocket unions" as Parry terms them (2009) – who built favourable ties with both the state-run company and a host of different subcontractors, to the extent that management would fire any supporters of a rival union who were "prepared to fight the corner of contract labour" (Parry 2013:372). This bind between the pocket unions, the state plant and subcontractors, thus, created a market wherein vast sections of the labour force

[24] Sharad Chari (2004), in detailing the highly masculinist rigidities of union activism in Tiruppur's (Tamil Nadu) garment factories (also CITU in his own research) and their relative inaction towards the gendered segregation of work positions – often doing little to combat the worsened precarious conditions of women workers –, suggests that trade union activism in India seldom engaged with wider debates of structural inequality that traversed across the workforce. Other scholars (Fernandes 1997, Cross 2014, Bear 2014) have also reiterated a similar argument. Their work, thus, is a crucial reminder that while rising levels of precarity and inequality have greatly transformed labour relations across India's industrial zones, the gendered limitations set by and advanced amongst trade union activism simply cannot be ignored. I suggest that CITU and Sundaram, evidenced perhaps by the fact that all the local workers at BHEL that day were men, were bound by similar logics. To my questions about the space for local women in the TANGEDCO power plants, Sundaram told me that some women found contractual positions as "sweepers" and "cleaners". CITU, he added, represented those women too, and was also quick to insist that many of them worked without dues being cleared, had considerable amounts of money siphoned by subcontractors, and often, were even denied statutory pay rises after many years of consistent employment. Though my conversation with Sundaram about CITU's representation of Ennore's working women was limited, I expand a little more on women's participation in labour politics in the following chapter.

were retained on contracts, even in work positions that demanded otherwise, allowing for a system of illegal profiteering to overshadow the contractual rights of the precarious worker.

Similarly, writing about the interplay of illegal practices, crime and corruption that marked labour relations in a private steel plant in India, Andrew Sanchez (2017) further highlights how unions themselves merged freely with local gangsters and corrupt state-level politicians, exercising considerable control over the lives of contractual workers. And, thus, in extension, the workers, conscious of their highly precarious situation, found limited means by which they could collectively challenge their employment conditions. Additionally, contractual workers were hindered by a string of legislative loopholes, limited by an inefficient judiciary, and, frequently, even faced with the threat of violence by those (including the unions) who unevenly profited from the practices of subcontracting. Pressing this point further by drawing on Gramscian references, Parry (2009) writes that unions generally "contain class struggle, organize consent, and entrench hegemony" and, when associated with the private sector, largely work as "the tools of private capital".

Importantly, such considerations on the corruption and illegalities that characterize unions, companies, and (sub-)contracted work in industrial India are circulated not only by scholars, but also, as Parry writes, by workers themselves. For the precarious workers Parry met in Chhattisgarh, it caused them a form of resignation, as it was so obvious to them that "party and union leaders [would] ultimately be revealed as corrupt and self-serving that they [concluded] that things couldn't be otherwise and that nothing [could] change – at least not without the miraculous appearance of a truly disinterested messiah" (2009:202).

As my previous transcription of Sundaram's own account shows, labour politics around TANGEDCO's Ennore power plants reflected similar points. The predominance of contract work was blatant, as were the ways by which employment at the power plants was parasitic on contractors and sub-contractors. The fraught workings of union and party politics had also begun to appear to me by the end of my motorcycle ride with Sundaram.

Sundaram explained how the workers we were to meet had earlier reached out to the legislative assembly member from their local constituency – a politician who even shared the men's caste background, and who was known to hold some influence over the subcontracting market in Ennore. However, upset and disheartened with his inaction – the rumour went that the politician had already received his pay out from the worker's deal and thus had no more reason to intervene – the men had decided to reach out to a union for help. But choosing

CITU to represent them was still no simple matter for the workers. Similar to the situation described by Parry in Chhattisgarh, Tamil Nadu was dense in its own union politics (see Chari 2004, Ramaswamy 1983). CITU, at the time of my fieldwork, were just one of many unions operating in the area, and they were in no way the "pocket union" of TANGEDCO, nor did they have any close associations with subcontractors in the region or with the ruling pollical party at the time. As one of the workers would later tell me, the men had needed to make a choice when deciding which union to affiliate with, and the criteria were multiple[25]. Their decision had eventually boiled down to two options: either the union wing of the opposition party, with some of the men believing that they would put up the most effort given that assembly elections were due soon; or CITU, the leader of which, the man told me, had come highly recommended by a few other local workers in Ennore.

I realized then that, as the man presented it to me, the worker's choice of signing up with CITU eventually boiled down to Sundaram's reputation:

> For us, this [losing our jobs] is a big *piracannai*", the man told me. "But they [BHEL, TANGEDCO] are not listening to us. They think we are nobodies. Now we will make it a bigger *piracannai*. That is why we asked *sir* [Sundaram] to intervene.

By the man's own admission, Sundaram was tasked at tackling TANGEDCO, BHEL and the subcontractors – those who caused such *piracannai* that left the workers with "nothing". As my ethnography has begun showing, Sundaram was intent on presenting himself as akin to anti-corruption and even environmental activists: as one who spoke out in defence of workers, and as one who held the skills, connexions and material means to help them out. But I want to insist here that asking whether or not Sundaram's claims were honest, or his commitment to social change was 'disinterested' (Parry 2009), would be missing the point of this chapter. For one, as I attempt to make clear in my transcriptions of our encounters, Sundaram and I had become friends over our year-long relationship. Here, I want to honour the trust he showed me by taking seriously Sundaram's own incomplete, partial and partisan view on things (See Astuti 2017, Graeber 2015).

Additionally, driving my focus away from normative questions about Sundaram's work also serves a methodological and theoretical purpose. As Lisa Björkman writes (2021), decades of scholarly debates about political intermediaries such as union leaders, 'brokers', *dalals*, and all kinds of 'middlemen' operating in the Indian context, have tended to focus on

[25] See Ramaswamy (1983) for an account of labour and union politics in a Coimbatore factory.

the normative aspects of this mediation. As such, the question they have generally addressed has been whether this mediation either "reproduces or destabilizes established structures of authority" (2021:8). Those scholars have then interrogated at length the moral ambivalence of political mediation such as that performed by union leaders, recurrently flagging it as a "sphere of activity bound up with criminality and political-administrative distortion" (ibid.)[26].

However, Björkman's contribution to this debate lies in suggesting that ethnographic accounts might move away from assessing the morality of political mediation, and instead cast their gaze on the content of those practices, asking: how do political intermediaries such as union leaders achieve their goals? What skill set is required for their work to be performed efficaciously? How does their expertise unfold in intimate relation to specific, local contexts and situations? Following Björkman's cue, those are the questions I grapple with in this chapter. Indeed, I am not asking whether Sundaram sized up to the "truly disinterested messiah" whom Parry (2009) refers to as the only figure capable of federating industrial workers, and paving the way for urgent, much needed social change. Instead, I want to take a sideways approach, drawing on my time spent with Sundaram, showing how his union leadership involved in an impressive range of practices. By keeping close to the intricacies of *piraccanai* and the illegalities that swarmed Ennore, Sundaram's practices, I argue, were far from materially inconsequential. As Parry himself concedes, "it would be a mistake to conclude that unions are irrelevant to workers" given the variegated ways in which union leaders serve "all sorts of instrumental purposes" for those they represent (2009).

Having given an overview of the landscape of labour relations and the illegalities that coal's industrial circulation and combustion was generating around Ennore and the TANGEDCO power plants, let me now return to Sundaram. The previous ethnographic section showed Sundaram's ability to map out *piracannai* in Ennore's landscape of coal. The next section, in following through the meeting Sundaram and I were driving towards, stages

[26] An example of such a debate would be those surrounding the divide between political society and civil society. For Partha Chatterjee (2004), mediators are the "formally recognized political representatives" of political society who carry out negotiations with the government. However, other scholars have problematised such a definition. For example, Colebridge et al. (2012) are quick to point out that the role of mediators finds no fixed formal position within political society, and instead argue that forms of collective action through mediatory processes have resulted in both successful outcomes for certain populations, and, contrarily, even dreadful acts of violence on those seeking to petition the state (See also Gudavarthy and Vijay 2012).

Sundaram's mastery at navigating this complex, layered landscape – an expertise, I will go on to show, that involved his own careful manufacturing of *piracannai*.

Causing more *piracannai*: tactics for navigating a landscape of coal

'We are here to resolve this matter'

Eventually, Sundaram and I arrived at a gate with a placard that advertised the premises of the new power plant. We followed a slightly more paved road up to a large warehouse, stopping by a big metal container filled with industrial cable; stationed, lifelessly, under the shadows of a partially built cooling tower. From inside the warehouse, a security guard walked up to us and greeted Sundaram with a quick salute, Sundaram, in return, nodding in receipt. Sundaram asked the security guard if the site manager was in and the guard responded doubtfully, however, insisting that he was willing to go check for Sundaram. Telling the guard not to do so, Sundaram instead asked Ganesh, Prakash and I to park our bikes by the container, proceeding, then, to narrate a sequence of stories about his own past as a TANGEDCO engineer to me. Telling me about his early forays into union work, detailing, in particular, the tenuous conflicts that brewed amongst unionised staff as TANGEDCO pushed to casualise some of their workforce in the early nineties, Sundaram spoke like a seasoned orator, gesticulating heavily to add emphasis when he deemed it necessary, weaving in occasional greetings to the crowd of men that slowly began swelling around us.

In a matter of minutes, the group had grown considerably in size – I counted twenty-two men in total – and a tall man with a husky voice asked Sundaram if it was time for them to commence proceedings given that everyone on the BHEL contract had gathered. Gauging the size of the group with a quick calculative glance, Sundaram nodded in agreement, asking me to follow him as we walked through the warehouse, on to the other side, and into the BHEL site offices that were tucked away in the back. Curious as to who I was, a few amongst the group asked Sundaram if I was a journalist, and Sundaram, much to my bemusement, insisted otherwise. Proudly, he said:

> "He's a student. A *London karaan* [London man, Londoner]. He's come all the way from there to study Ennore, to see all the *piracannai* the power plants have caused. He'll write a report about TANGEDCO one day."

Some amongst the group grew less wary, as I timidly greeted the men who were besides me, hurriedly explaining that I was in fact was from Chennai and not London, and revealing, to their surprise, that I could also speak Tamil. But despite all my efforts to redeem myself as someone from the same city, Sundaram's characterisation of me as holding some links to the United Kingdom proved too hard to dismantle, while I started to realize that my supposed foreignness provided a good alibi, nullifying any threat that I might have signified for the men if I had, instead, been a local tangled in their political struggles. At the same time, it was quite clear that my presentation as a *London karaan* elevated Sundaram's own persona, as he displayed an overseas contact accompanying him on his endeavours. As for my part, I felt both self-conscious and amused at the situation Sundaram was putting me in, yet I was overall grateful for the small talk it helped me generate with the workers, as they quizzed me about the weather in England, where to find South Indian food in London's supermarkets, down to whether I was married and when I planned to be.

I then noticed a small group of BHEL staff posing, seemingly, for a group photograph as we eventually entered the premises of their offices. Hurriedly, they dispersed on having noticed us approach them and the man with the husky voice pointed to an individual amongst their group and told Sundaram that he was onsite Human Resource Officer (HRO). "He was the one who threatened us with police action", the man added, as the HRO, looking bewildered by the situation, chose to wait for the group to reach him.

> "We are here to meet the site-engineer", Sundaram proclaimed as he strode forwards. "Their contracts have been terminated prematurely", he added, pointing to the men while saying so. "We are here to resolve this matter."

The HRO, unenthusiastically, told Sundaram that he would have to go and see if the site-engineer was in his cabin, asking us to wait by a far corner as he stepped into one of the offices. There was some immediate rejoicing amongst the group, I noted, with one man even humorously adding that if he had known how easy it was going to be with the HRO, he would have requested that the meeting take place after lunch, drawing a laugh out of a few others.

Sundaram, however, disapproved of their behaviour with a stern quip. He told the men that they had to be patient, reminding them that nothing had happened just yet.

> "Everyone here is a *company karaan*", he added instructively. "You cannot believe what they say just like that. Then you will leave with nothing in your hands."

Over the next half hour, with the HRO not having exited the office even once, the men's initial enthusiasm slowly grew into palpable frustration. Sundaram took stock of the situation and told Ganesh and Prakash to stay alert, pointing to the men while passing on his instructions. Then, as the HRO surfaced from the office, attempting at first to ignore the men as he walked past them, he was blocked off by Sundaram just as he began quickening his stride.

> "Sir, he [the site-engineer] is not in the office", the HRO reactively told Sundaram. "He'll only come back in one hour. You have to wait."

At that moment, the group burst with significant aggression. The man with the husky voice spurted a string of accusations, directing the HRO to call the site-engineer and have him come that very moment. A few other men joined him and demanded the same, as Sundaram began urging the men to exercise some patience, with Ganesh and Prakash even preventing some of them from forcefully crowding the HRO. When tempers momentarily settled, Sundaram told the officer that the group had no intention of waiting. They would come again, he added, telling the HRO that it was best that the matter found resolution over a privately arranged meeting, insisting, that it need not have to become "too big a *piracannai* for all the *parties* involved". Then, asking the group to leave the premises with him, as a few stood startled by expeditiousness of the events, as the men began hounding Sundaram as we walked back to the container. "Why did we leave", one of them asked, as another man insisted that they should have waited, adding, boastfully, that he could have made the site-engineer come and fall at their feet. Ignoring the many remarks the men made, Sundaram waited till we reached our bikes before, unexpectedly, asking them what it was that they wanted:

> "Tell me, do you want jobs, or do you want a compensation fee?" he rhetorically called out.

The men, still upset, further levelled out their frustrations with how the meeting had transpired before collectively deciding on their common demand for their jobs to be reinstated. A compensation fee, they concluded, was only worthwhile if they were guaranteed good money. Sundaram then explained that if the reinstation of their jobs were indeed their demands, it was best that they all decide when they met the site-engineer, insisting that waiting on the HRO's word offered them nothing.

> "We have to come, like this, with a big group, and show who we are", Sundaram professed, telling the men that the decision to come unannounced was primarily to

> intimidate managerial staff, thereby, letting the HRO know that they "were not willing to accommodate to his [the manager's] schedules."

One man asked Sundaram if it was not the sub-contractor who needed to be contacted, to which Sundaram, for what appeared the first time, reacted explosively. Calling the subcontractor a "lying thief", Sundaram insisted that the men leave the subcontractor out of all future dealings, reminding them that if it was jobs they were looking for, then it was only BHEL that had them.

A few other men then expressed their apprehensions towards facing police action, a threat which the HRO had used when they had approached BHEL without Sundaram's representation. Telling the men that their new affiliations with CITU would assist them in responding to police controls, asserting that the legal mandates for a police case only found weight if the men acted violently. The air around the group seemed to slowly grow less tense and the men agreed to reconvene in three days' time to attempt another renegotiation under Sundaram's lead.

In that very moment, Sundaram, with a newfound aggression in his voice, offered a parting statement that revealed the extent of his determination. Loudly, after proclaiming that he would "right the wrong" that BHEL had committed, he exclaimed:

> "And then if he [the site engineer] says 'no' to us one more time, or says we must wait again, then, he will see what we can do. Then he will know how much *piraccanai* we can cause."

Sometimes causing *piraccanai* was deemed the best possible solution in Ennore and Sundaram, most certainly, knew this all too well.

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Adding some depth to Sundaram's own self-characterization and presentation as an influential union leader, this ethnographic section has described a typical situation in the thick of which Sundaram's expertise and charisma unfolded. Writing on cities, Thomas Blom Hansen and Oskar Verkaaik (2009) characterizes "charisma" as the registers of conduct deployed by people who are gifted with intimate, localized knowledge of the context at hand. Such charisma comes out discursively and performatively in the multiple ways in which those people can "act decisively, with style and without fear", as they convert "opacity, impenetrability, historicity and latent possibilities" into resources. Importantly, Hansen and

Verkaaik insist that this mode of conduct and the range of practices it entails are not the intrinsic property of any select individual, but rather, that they emerge from repeated, intimate encounters with surrounding contexts – contexts that can themselves be thought of as contagiously charismatic. While the landscape of coal I describe throughout this thesis can in many ways be thought of as 'urban', especially under a contemporary condition of what has been called an 'urbanisation of the world' (Brenner 2009), it had little to do with the cities that Hansen and Verkaaik write about. And yet, I would like to argue that the landscapes unfolding in cities share one crucial feature with the context I studied: density, understood in all possible material senses (Rao 2007). The landscape of coal in which Sundaram operated was as thick and dense, and opaque as any city, allowing me to extend Hansen and Verkaaik's contribution to my own research.

The expertise Sundaram put in play, I want to suggest, can then also be understood, paraphrasing Hansen and Verkaaik, as drawing from charisma *in* and *of* the landscape he operated in. To use another reference which Hansen and Verkaaik also draw upon, I want to characterize Sundaram as a virtuoso in the opportunistic mode of acting with, what Michel de Certeau (1988) famously characterized as 'tactics': a way of constantly manipulating events in a bid to turn them into opportunity. Through putting in play an arsenal of situation-specific tactics and charismatic conducts, that were all embedded in his knowledge of the context at hand, Sundaram managed to navigate a fluctuating landscape (Vigh 2009) saturated with illegalities. Through those tactics and performances of charisma, his work as a union leader unfolded as an embodied practice of mediation through the various situations that arose.

In the following section, I add further depth to Sundaram's portrait, and detail my argument about how his charismatic, tactical and navigational skills were based on his intimate knowledge of the landscape of coal he operated in. This knowledge repertoire involved his economic fluency in the current organisation of local job markets (contracted, subcontracted or otherwise), his expertise in legislative texts and proceedings, his well-oiled political and administrative contacts and resources (what Hansen and Verkaaik term "infrapower"), his detailed understandings of the chemical and technical workings of the power plants, and his lifelong, tenacious intimacy with TANGEDCO.

Knowledge repertoire and tactical arsenal

Sundaram insisted, as we made our way back to the gates of the NCTPS, that the staff at BHEL had to 'see' that they were willing to show up as a big group. The HRO had to realise that Sundaram, a trade union leader, was now in charge of representing the men, thereby dressing their demands in a new sense of urgency. Even letting BHEL know that they were willing to negotiate in private was a strategical move, such that management staff recognised that CITU and Sundaram, despite having the resources to take them to court and knowing very well that BHEL's actions were in violation of labour legislation, had chosen not to.

> "Like this", Sundaram told me, "I fight for the people of Ennore. Because here, they easily get tricked by the promise of employment. They don't know how it actually works with TANGEDCO."

At first glance, while the events that morning might have appeared largely unessential, leading the men no closer to the reinstation of their contracts, I later came to understand that most of Sundaram's decisions were premised not only on mapping out existing trouble caused by the government's illegal practices and lack on concern for workers – but also, on instigating further *piracannai.* In other words, by deciding to turn up announced, by insisting that the men show up in large numbers, by refusing to wait for the site engineer to return to the offices, by even explicitly telling the HRO that he sought to resolve the issue in private, not wanting to escalate what he called a "small problem" into a big one, Sundaram carefully advanced certain tactical ploys of *piraccanai* in a push to restore the jobs of the men.

As the previous ethnography would have suggested by, Sundaram's tactics were grounded in a deep-seated ***understanding of the labour market that surrounded the power plants***. He possessed a detailed familiarity with the reticulated chains of contracted and subcontracted opportunities and knew the pitfalls that characterized this job market. By the time we left the warehouse, Sundaram was already devising a few different ways by which he could instigate more *piracannai,* to press out the men's demands for the reinstation of their jobs. Leaving the subcontractor out of it was the first important step, as Sundaram later explained to me:

> They [the workers] think that because they got their job from the subcontractor, it is the subcontractor who will give it back to them. That is how they get fooled here. If you think there is only one subcontractor, then you are wrong. The subcontractor himself will have more subcontractors under him. But all of them just want money. What is the

point in asking them? You need to stick with the main contractor… the *company* [in English]: they are those who need to face the pressure.

For BHEL to "face the pressure", beyond the group showing up unannounced a second time, Sundaram also had a few other plans in order: tactics that rested on ***the impressive legal expertise*** he had acquired over the years. He explained to me how he would shore up, with CITU linked lawyers, possible means by which they could challenge BHEL on legal grounds. This, as he said, could range from taking BHEL into the process of arbitration at the Labour Commissionerate Office, to filing lawsuits at the High Court for criminal misdemeanour – a case could be filed for "cheating", he insisted to me. This legal expertise was a characteristic that could be often found among Indian union leaders, "many of them stemming from an overall better access to education" (Parry 2009: 187).

A passage from an interview I recorded with Sundaram on the afternoon that followed the BHEL negotiation further exposes his legal expertise. As we sat at the CITU office in the heart of the city, using the press room to conduct an recorded interview, Sundaram cleared his voice and said:

> TANGEDCO acquired 1000 acres for this project [the SEZ power plant] from local farmers, explaining to them that the land would be used to construct a *sambal yeri* [ash pond]. But now, they have initiated the work for constructing a new thermal power station on the same land. This is wrong, because, according to the Land Acquisition Act of 2013, the acquired land should be used only for the purpose stated when acquired. They can't construct something else. But they have started constructing the plant already. That is one issue. Now, as a part of the construction work, one contract has been given to a company called *Simplex*. The company only employs labourers from other states instead of local laborers. The work force, mostly *hindi karaan*, aren't provided with any mandated benefits from the company. There is an existing law called the Interstate Migrant Workmen Act that was formulated in 1979 which the central government claims is not in full order just yet. But the implementation of this law still must be adhered to. This means that when the company brings in labourers from other states, all the mandatory benefits must be provided… including a ration card, accommodation and other entitlements. Nothing of this sort is happening and instead labourers are brought in through different subcontractors at various rates. They [migrant workers] are made to work 12-hour shifts and are given wages only for 8 hours. If local labourers are used, they won't accept this. They will ask for overtime wages. So, to cut costs on wages, the company uses other state laborers and lie saying local labour cause all forms of issues that is why we don't want them. So, here, they have violated the law on both counts. They have violated the Land Acquisition Act and Interstate Migration Law. We can use both violations in our case. Our demand is clear.

> We want more local labour in the power plants. If they don't comply, we will take them to court.

Thus, moving from violations of the Land Acquisition Act (2013) to noncompliance with the Interstate Migrant Workmen Act (1979), Sundaram displayed a remarkable proficiency in legal and contractual texts. As previously stated, this proficiency with the law also extended to Sundaram's tactical prowess, though he expressed some caution in taking BHEL to court. He knew how congested India's legal system was and did not want his efforts in reinstating the men's contracts to end up as a court case where it sometimes took many years to receive a trial date, let alone a verdict. It was always the "last solution" he insisted. Instead, Sundaram told me he would display the legal expertise he possessed, by disclosing to BHEL the many ways in which he could take them to court. He told me he wanted to show BHEL that he was ready to "file cases" if they delayed on his first objective of getting their management to negotiate privately with the men and him. He confirmed that the chances of the men reaching an agreement with BHEL only played to their odds if the meeting was privately managed, however, most often requiring a series of veiled and open threats – ways of mounting the "pressure" – for the company to reach that stage.

Mounting the pressure, Sundaram went on to explain, was a range of other tactics he would devise by gauging BHEL's response to his threats, thereby making the incident he was to manage a 'big matter'. For example, if BHEL did not accept his request for a private meeting, with him having already informed their managerial staff that he was ready to take them to court, Sundaram would first summon them to the Labour Commissionerate Office by filing an affidavit that stated that the worker's contracts were violated unfairly and in noncompliance with due procedure. He would, thereby, make perceptible the conflict the men faced with BHEL to a smaller yet influential state government department, leaving the possibility of a private negotiation still open. Throughout this time, he also insisted, he would still maintain the threat of more rigorous lawsuits. If BHEL stalled further, by either filing counter affidavits or by not yielding to a private meet, he would file case after case at a local magistrate court till they yielded to a meet. A logjammed judicial system also meant that he could use the time that it took for filed cases to move up the judicial ladder to work out a deal in private, withdrawing cases if a consensus was agreed upon. What, in effect, I argue, Sundaram attempted to do with such tactical ploys was to allow for BHEL illegalities to remain out of the purview of the court system if they yielded to his demands of reinstating the

men's contracts. He was willing to restrict the perceptibility the company's violation of the law by allowing it to remain a 'small matter' if they were, as he said, 'good people'.

While these were some of the means by which Sundaram caused *piracannai* in Ennore, interspersed with his legal expertise was also a technical understanding of the infrastructures he believed local populations must benefit from. In other words, Sundaram also deployed another set of embodied knowledge from his repertoire: his ***understanding of the power plants' technical and chemical workings***. Take for example his response to my question about his union's demand for the employment of local labour. Having also asked him if CITU did not represent any of the migrant workers he had spoken about, Sundaram said:

> We are trying to represent them (migrant workers), but it is very difficult. Language problems are there, and they are also very scared. If they join us, their subcontractors threaten them, so the situation is not easy. But for the local workers, you must understand, it is different. See, in Ennore 20,000 tons of coal is burnt every day and nearly 40,000 tons of coal is docked in the harbour. Firstly, if one ton of coal is burnt, 2 tons of carbon dioxide is released as a result, which means in Ennore 40,000 tons of carbon dioxide is released per day. Besides this, there is ash that also needs to be handled. For inland coal, the ash content will be 40% and for imported coal the ash content will be 10-15%. But the boilers used are manufactured specifically for Indian coal. Because of this, the imported coal is blended with the Indian coal for usage and that means ash content is nearly 35%. That means if 20,000 tons of coal gets burnt, nearly 7000 tons of ash is also deposited everyday with all that carbon dioxide. This is what happens here. And, though the local people bear the brunt of all this damage, they don't benefit from the thermal power station being there. Free electricity is not to be provided to them and the tariff, which is applicable for others, is applicable for them too. If there are power cuts for others, there are power cuts for the locals too. Clearly, there are no benefits and people are losing their livelihoods. So that is why we insist that local labourers be employed. We will demonstrate this in our efforts.

From the types of coal used, to a breakdown of ash content and carbon dioxide release, to the levels of sulphur dioxide that was flushed out during the combustion process, Sundaram laid out his intimate knowledge of the technical and operational specificities of the power plants. When I pressed him to know more about how he would demonstrate that the hiring of local labour in Ennore needed to be prioritised, he told me it would range from organising small scale protests outside the gates of the power plants to large scale rallies outside the TANGEDCO headquarters in the city. He would stick posters, organise press releases, file petitions, all in an effort to maintain his push for the employment of local workers (like the men we had met) by brandishing them, in strategic intervals, as victims of an 'inconsiderate' government. In other words – and this is the subject of more ethnographic

and conceptual focus in the next chapter –, a part of causing *piracannai* was geared at making Ennore's locals, and the landscape of coal they lived in, perceptible to the 'public' (Cody 2011, Warner 2002, Chowdhury 2019, Bate 2009).

But how does one build up such knowledge repertoire? How did Sundaram come to know the inner workings of TANGEDO and the power plants so well? A snippet of Sundaram's biography is useful here, to make sense of the ***tenacity with which he led a life in the intimate vicinity of TANGEDCO***.

Having started his career as an engineer with the Tamil Nadu Electricity Board (TNEB), which later bifurcated into a state-owned generation and distribution company (TANGEDCO) and a state-owned transmission company (TANTRANSCO), Sundaram spent his early days in the Mettur Thermal Power Station in the west of Tamil Nadu. The power plant was commissioned in 1987 and TNEB had then decided to employ a large faction of local workers – many of whom who were left unemployed after the closure of a few privately owned mills in the region – on a contractual basis for maintenance work. While CITU was already an active union at the power plant, with Sundaram then only a regular member amongst their ranks, the union eventually took up the contractual workers petition for a revision of their salaries given that many had completed several years of work on the same pay even after the plant began operations. This, as he said, first involved countering TNEB narratives that forwarded the union as an 'anti-development institution', slowly showing contractual workers that they were willing to protect them against local subcontractors, eventually registering a separate union wing under the regional CITU branch solely for the need of contract workers. Early demonstrations and protests, Sundaram insisted, proved successful with CITU managing to raise the salaries of contract workers on a yearly basis. However, through this time, he told me that many union members and contract workers faced the threat of police violence and were often pre-emptively put under police custody through various penal provisions. As he said:

> "If you tell them [TANGEDCO] they need to follow the law, they will say 'who are you tell us?'. But we were not scared even if they put us in lockup."

Later, having become the secretary of the contract workers union, Sundaram was told of a provision under the contract act that made it mandatory for temporary workers employed in the same position to be given permanent roles if their employment exceeded three continuous years. Having confirmed this with a senior lawyer, what then developed was a long battle with TNEB that involved Sundaram petitioning India's judicial system all the way

up to the Supreme Court[27] before he won his case for many of the earliest contract employees. While his persistence, he told me, escalated his stature within CITU, propelling his career within the union – which he caveated by insisting it was a horizontal career trajectory in line with the union's strict communist leanings – those three years were also extremely 'difficult' for him. Dispersed through those years, he told me, were also a series of protests, petitions and lawsuits at lower courts, where CITU and him used different government orders, clauses and verdicts from other union cases to push TNEB to regularise the employment of the workers. And, as a consequence, Sundaram experienced a range of retaliatory actions from TNEB in a bid to deter his case. Take for instance, his narration of his very first protest he organised as the secretary of the contract workers union. After TNEB had fired 23 temporary workers because they chose to change contractors, Sundaram said:

> Everyone stopped working in protest. TNEB threatened them, told them to leave but still everyone was resilient. But those 23 workers were arrested by the police. They were taken away and then we changed action. Some went on strike outside the police station so no harm would be done to them. Some protested outside the gates and then they were released. That is how they [the government] will threaten you. And like that we also reacted.

Given that the contract workers at halted generation at the Mettur Power Plant, the Tamil Nadu Electricity Minister at the time called in the Superintendent of Police to daunt the protestors with police action. Simultaneously, a false 'attempted murder' case was filed against Sundaram in parallel and this drew an arrest warrant for him, however, dropped soon after negotiations yielded favourable results for all the parties involved. But this did not deter TNEB from using other means by which they could exercise their authority over Sundaram. As he added:

> When I began protesting for the rights of contract workers here [in Mettur], they transferred me to Ennore. When I began organising the workers there, they transferred me to the Tuticorin power plant. And eventually, I even got transferred back to Mettur because they had enough of me in Tuticorin. But you must understand, it is a public sector organisation. They are vindictive and will cause a lot of *piracannai* for you. But there is a *limit* [in English]. They won't cross it just like that and you must also know where it is.

And, at another point in our interview:

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[27] Sundaram was refereeing to Writ Petition 555 from 1990. Throughout the interview, he would call it the "555 case".

> Even in this case [with BHEL] there is a *limit*. You have to keep that in mind. We can make a *piracannai* but there is a *limit* [in English].

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Thus far, in this chapter, I have written about Sundaram, a charismatic CITU leader, and his ability to map and cause *piracannai* in Ennore. Translating to both 'problem' and 'trouble' in English, *piracannai*, Sundaram told me, came infused with the politics of labour that surrounded the power plants. From the blatant violations of important labour legislation, to the wider network of subcontractors and corrupt politicians who legally and illegally profited of maintaining a precarious workforce, Sundaram described to me a shifting landscape of labour relations that was riddled in all forms *piracannai*. This made up the first section in this chapter.

Thereafter, by focusing on his efforts to reinstate the jobs of a few local workers whose contracts were illegally terminated by BHEL – a large government owned construction company that was building the TANGEDCO SEZ power plant in Ennore, I unravel Sundaram's 'tactical' (de Certeau 1988) devising and causing *piracannai* of his own. I show that while some of Sundaram's tactical expertise found roots in his intimate experience of deciphering labour legislation and in his understanding of the technical operations of the power plants, a lot of his know-how and knowledge had also previously been tried and honed as a former TNEB engineer and union leader. Having been frequently transferred by TNEB for his actions as a union leader – even laughing off a false 'attempt to murder' case that was filed against him by TNEB management when he protested the premature termination of 23 contract workers –, I have paused this chapter at the moment when Sundaram told me there was a 'limit' to causing *piracannai* that required discerning.

There are two points I would like to develop from here. The first, I want to highlight, is that a lot of what I have argued as being Sundaram's tactical and navigational expertise resembled the ways in which the fishermen lived and fished by the power plants. Just as the fishermen knew the waters of Ennore intimately, measuring its shifting properties every time they waded through the toxic infused river to set up their nets, Sundaram possessed an intimate knowledge of the illegalities that unfolded with power plant's labour market, deploying different tactics of *piracannai* as the situation changed in front of him. While what it was that fishermen and Sundaram were 'navigating' within this landscape of coal was

different – the fishermen having to mediate different forms of embodied labour as a result of their hampered *thozil* – their respective stories provide some insight into "act(s)s of moving" in a landscape that is itself "wavering and unsettled" (Vigh 2009).

The second point I'd like to make is more a question that emerged from my interview with Sundaram. As I listened to the recordings of the interviews a few times, analysing my transcripts while on field, his use of the word 'limit' stood out quite strongly. Though I did not get the chance to ask Sundaram on the day of the interview *what* the 'limit' he spoke of was, or *where* it was that it lay, my meeting with Sundaram a month after the BHEL incident proved a little more insightful in this regard.

Meeting at a central government complex in the centre of Chennai, I first asked Sundaram about how negotiations with BHEL had proceeded. He told me that the second unannounced visit had proved uneventful and was at that time waiting for a date to be commissioned for a hearing at the Labour Commissionerate Office, before telling me once again:

"Ennore is full of *piracannai*!"

He went on:

> "A few days ago we protested against the *transfer* [in English] of three employees because they demanded that TANGEDCO provide identity cards for contract workers with photos on it. That is the rule. It has to be practiced. Otherwise subcontractors are getting some people to work and giving the salaries to other people. But it is not new what TANGEDCO did. We were prepared. We knew they were going to *transfer* [in English] them."

Then, Sundaram asked me if I had the messaging service WhatsApp on my phone and after confirming that I did, sent me two Tamil newspaper clippings and a link to a YouTube video about the incident on my number. "Intense Protest Outside the North Chennai Thermal Power Station", the headline read as the image of the newspaper clipping opened (see Figure 13). As I began to read the report in more detail, Sundaram weighed in again. He said:

> "There is a *limit*. I told you. When you exceed it, then they [TANGEDCO] will use their methods. They will transfer you and threaten you and do all that. They won't let you cross it just like that. How can they? There will always be some response."

Instinctively, in response to his statements, I asked Sundaram if he knew where the 'limit' lay and if so, if he could tell me more about where or even what that 'limit' actually was. He laughed at my question and said:

"You spend all your life doing what I do, and then you will definitely know where it [the limit] is. That is all I can say, it is there but I can't show you like that."

Thereafter, he added:

"But remember, sometimes you have to cross the *limit*. That is important. Otherwise, everything will stay the same. Then, all the *piracannai* will be as they are."

Sundaram told me he had to go immediately after that. There were pressing matters that fell upon him that day. Just before he parted, however, he told me he would call me soon as there was a lot more that was going to happen in Ennore soon.

"With the BHEL case?", I probed.

"With everything!", he responded.

"I'll call you. You will understand what I'm saying better", he said before walking away briskly.

In the following chapter, it was 'everything else that was going to happen in Ennore' that I set out to explore – keeping a keen eye on when, if at all, a governmental 'limit' was deemed to have been crossed.

Figure 14. This was the banner for the seminar. It read: 'Central and state government action against employees to be strongly condemned by people's protests'. The titles of the events followed: 'All India General Strike' and '3rd Clarity Conference'.

Chapter 4: Crossing limits: Public meetings, crowds and accidents

"You will definitely see me"

Early one January morning, as we were speaking on the phone, Sundaram invited me to attend a "public seminar" that he was organizing in Ennore together with other union representants "for the discussion of issues". He clarified that the event was a conference involving a series of speakers, and that it was a precursor to the '*Bharath Bandh'* or 'All India General Strike'– a nationwide labour union strike that was to follow a few weeks on. This public seminar was in itself very significant, Sundaram insisted, as it was part of some of the measures CITU was taking to strengthen workers' rights in Ennore, and challenge what he called the mounting "greed of the *companies*".

Curiously, however, when I asked Sundaram where the seminar was going to take place in Ennore, he offered me a rather arbitrary set of directions, instead of the fixed address or venue I was expecting for an event of that importance.

> "You know that bridge across the power plant", he told me assuredly, "follow that road straight down, and then, you will definitely see me."

The road that Sundaram mentioned ran perpendicular to the gates of the NCTPS, leading across the bridge, and up to a large industrial zone. Later that evening, as I crossed the bridge on my motorbike and approached a liquid petroleum gas facility, I noticed the back of a large banner, standing tall by the side of the road, further ahead of me. To the corner of the banner, by a small tea shop, I spotted Sundaram standing.

He waved for me to approach, and I parked my bike a few feet away from the banner, noticing that it was tied to the ends of two wooden poles, somewhat unsteadily weighed down by large cement bags, only missing the edge of the main road by a few precarious feet. Rows of plastic chairs were arranged in front of the banner, facing its printed side, while six other chairs, those that were meant for the main speakers of the event, stood opposite. A standing microphone and a large speaker were assembled in the centre, tapping electricity from the tea shop with the help of long repurposed electric line. In addition, tied all around the scene – from the sides of the banner to the poles of the tea shop, even on a few of the motorbikes that were parked around the banner – were the flags of all the different trade unions, floating in the breeze. Sundaram was right. There had been a slim chance of him, if not of the scene in itself, going unnoticed.

As I walked up to Sundaram, he pointed to the banner and somewhat apologetically told me that the bigger protest was still a few weeks away, repeating that the seminar I was at was an event organized to publicize what was yet to come. Advertising the details of the strike that was to follow, the banner called the event the '3rd Clarity Conference' and confirmed that it was part of the 'All India General Strike', with the acronyms of different trade unions advertised on the bottom. The image of two large hands crushing the body of a man was meant to depict the workers struggles, as one CITU member explained me. Dates and venues were also included, exhibited to the sides and bottom of the layout.

Sundaram handed me a pamphlet which displayed the same details as the banner, additionally listing out the demands that unions had conjointly put forward to both the central and state governments:

Make all contract workers permanent.
Everyone needs to receive rations. In times of urgency and emergency there needs to be price regulation.
Unemployment has to be eradicated.
Let labour laws be implemented.
Take strict action against those who break labour laws.
All workers need social protection.
You can't pay anyone less than 18000 a month.
Miniumum 3000 per month as a pension scheme.
The selling of government land to private companies has to be blocked.
Fair compensation for a day's work.
Stop changing workers laws that harm workers.

The pamphlet went on to make scathing accusations against what it described as "Modi government's policies that have severely affected people and labouring people". In particular:

Many centres have closed in Thiruvottiyur.
There have been unjust work cancellations in L&T and BGR.
The police are not letting people document the breaches of the law committed by these industries.
The government supports mudhalalis [capitalists, owners] in preventing people from documenting or recording breaches of the law.
Administration favours people who already own things.
Construction labourers have not got housing.
The estuary is blocked and fisher folk cannot do their work.

In a final flourish, the pamphlet read:

We will make this strike successful and create good lives for ourselves!

I looked up from the sheet of paper and took in the whole setting. Men had begun occupying the vacant seats in the audience, and a murmur of anticipation floated about. I addressed Sundaram a casual remark about the choice of the venue: how it stood literally by the side of the road, and how seamlessly it seemed to fit in the stretch of street, despite all the traffic that was running past us.

> "People have to know that this is happening!" Sundaram exclaimed in response – before being pulled away to the front of the banner by a group of men, signalling to me that the meeting was about to commence.

•

This chapter picks up where the previous one ended, with my puzzlement over Sundaram's claims about a "limit" of governmental tolerance: *You spend all your life doing what I do, and then you will definitely know where [the limit] is. . . But remember, sometimes you have to cross the limit.* How did one learn about 'limits' and their location? Who or what was it that did the crossing, and how? What were the consequences of crossing a limit, and how did people prepare for the responses that the government had in store once its tolerance had been overstepped?

For example, take the discussion which concluded Chapter 3, about the three TANGEDCO employees who demanded that all temporary workers at TANGEDCO be provided identity cards in compliance with existing labour laws. Sundaram had implied that their demands had 'crossed a limit', thereby backfiring and triggering drastic action from TANGEDCO, with the men being threatened and ultimately transferred. Sundaram added that this particular 'limit' was one that he had foreseen. As he put it: *We were prepared. . . There is a limit. I told you. . . They won't let you cross it just like that. How can they? There will always be some response.* This chapter is then about Sundaram's tactical, continuous and careful *probing* of the 'limits', not only in an effort to learn about their configuration and whereabouts, but also to be prepared for their punctual *crossing*, and for the possibility of harnessing the government's 'response' to his advantage.

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This chapter is structured in three parts, each recounting a snippet of a political event, in which a particular modality of probing the limit was put in play.

First, I suggest that the seminar's 'probing of the limit' unfolded through a range of performative, aesthetic, and oratory registers typical of political events in Tamil Nadu (Bate 2009). This performative and aesthetic display, I further suggest, was harnessed to challenge the government's propensity for illegalities, and make CITU's own mobilisation perceptible to a select public. The public addressed by this curated display distorted the binary that is often drawn between 'civil society' and 'political society', as the seminar made legal demands of the government, while expressing the pain and outrage of those whom the pamphlet called "labouring people". Here, I suggest that examining the performative, oratory and aesthetic registers involved in the seminar's 'probing of limits' can shed light on some of the aestheticized ways by which governed populations can both denounce the failings of the government to enact their rights as citizens, and aim to hold the state accountable for its practices – thereby pushing to redefine the parameters of governance through what I call a 'politics of perceptibility'. In extension, I suggest here that those aesthetic and performative practices fell within Sundaram's arsenal of tactics for causing '*piracannai'* or 'trouble' (as discussed in Chapter 3).

But, the government's response was not always predictable, with the risk of 'crossing' weighing even on the savviest of tacticians, as Sundaram liked to present himself. In the second section, I describe a protest staged by the unions near a railway station in Ennore. I explain that it was largely dismissed as a rehearsed 'show' by many participants and spectators, while some of the same people remained aware both of the political potentialities of the event, and of the threat of violent retaliation. I show how the threat of escalation from a staged performance, to the unruliness of a 'crowd' contributed to the aesthetic and political effects of the protest, and was harnessed by Sundaram himself.

Precisely because of its theatrics, the 'show' could swiftly turn deadly serious. This almost happened at the railway protest, as the final section narrates, although not through the unruliness of a crowd, but through Arun's (my friend) and my presence. Our being there as urban middle-class researchers triggered unforeseen, dangerous consequences in the current heated political climate, where the police were prompt to brand potential trespassers as 'anti-

nationals'. Here, the 'limit' had finally been crossed – if only by 'accident' (Chowdhury 2019: 95-125, Bear 2014b). And it was probably only by Sundaram's charismatic intervention that more dire consequences were avoided.

The 'Conference for Clarity' seminar

'This government is a papaya government!'

Amidst the all-male audience at the seminar, I sat in one of the middle rows, by the chair that was closest to the road. The meeting began with one man walking up to the microphone and calling out to the groups of men standing by the road, telling them that there were free chairs specifically waiting for them:

> "My colleagues, please take a seat! They are taking photographs. It will look better if we are all seated. Please, my friends, come take a seat!"

The man by the microphone then began formally inviting a few senior union leaders to the set of chairs that faced the audience, individually calling out their names and announcing their official titles. After all the delegates, including Sundaram, were called up and had then proceeded to take a seat, a few union representatives huddled around the microphone and broke into a protest song. One of them called out a few slogans with a raised arm and a clenched fist, while the others, including the men seated with me in the audience, repeated each verse verbatim.

"... Let it win, let it win,

Let the protest in January win,

Let the stop-work protest win!

The central government, Modi's government,

Change your ways, change your ways,

Change your attitude and your ways! ..."

The group around the lead voice were equally animated, punching the air with their fists as they repeated each verse with added aggression. The audience around me were also enthused by the proceedings, patting the empty chairs by their sides, yelling out to colleagues and friends who stood in the corners to come join them.

In the middle of the song, a police officer walked up to the front and stood there for a moment, watching the men perform, leaving after taking a few photographs on his mobile phone. I was later told by Sundaram that the images were most likely meant for a report that each police division filed at the end of the day. These public meetings, he added, were after all events that had to be reported by the police to the state government for "security purposes". As he said:

"They think we are causing *piricannai* and we are saying it is them."

The first speaker who was invited to speak, a leader from the trade union wing of the All India Congress Party (AICP), was fierce in his discussion of how the current union government – what he continuously referred to as the 'Modi government' in light of Narendra Modi's prime ministership at the time – had gone at lengths to dilute numerous protective labour laws. Speaking of different clauses and acts that were being enforced under the Modi regime, thereby undermining the work India's trade unions had put in over many years, he motioned the attendees to show themselves "fearlessly" at the day of the strike, calling for Ennore's workers to unite in defeating "the government's anti-worker stance". His speech also happened to coincide with the end of the working at the petroleum gas facility. As a large number of workers walked out the gates, the speaker called out to them in the microphone, requesting that they come join the event and insisting that the meeting was organised to advance their own interests. A few men crossed over and took seats by my side, as one of the union representatives quickly handed them pamphlets about the strike.

"Read it", the speaker said pointing to the workers with the pamphlets, "that is the fight we have on our hands… We will fight and emerge victorious soon!"

Other speakers, either union leaders or union representatives[28] from a few private and state-owned companies, including a CITU member from the Vallur Thermal Power Plant, followed thereafter and echoed the contents of the pamphlets in what seemed to be the norm. Moreover, the speakers battled the constant drone of heavy motorized traffic that ran in parallel, yet each speaker outdoing the other by rallying their points and contentions with considerable vigour and animation. One speaker, deviating from the pamphlet, spoke of the ecological stress in the region that hampered the livelihoods of the fishermen. Another, went on to list a series of legal violations by Ennore's many "*companies*", juxtaposing his

[28] Union leaders are salaried union employees. Union representatives are members of specific trade unions and come under the leadership of union leaders.

accusations with numerous cases of police atrocities that many of the workers had reported to him, taking the seminar well into the night.

Figure 15 As night fell, the public meeting carries on. Sundaram, with his arms raised, makes numerous accusations of the central and state government.

Even Sundaram, commencing his speech only after dusk, regularly waved his finger in the air while discussing the government's actions. Insisting that the government's revision of labour compensation rates in fact "killed more workers", he called out:

> "This government only thinks of itself as having a stomach and not the daily labourer…this government is a *papaya government*! They will do whatever Adani wants them to do and then the police will say that the *company* [in English] does not steal from anyone… only the worker is capable of theft. That is how they silence us."
>
> Then, after pausing emphatically, Sundaram thundered:
>
> "There is murder on this government's hands!"

The seminar's publics

'People', Sundaram insisted, had to 'know' that the seminar was taking place. *You will definitely see me*, he had quipped at me, not bothering to give me a precise address, confident of the amount of sensorial, spatial and performative effects put in play to transform the side stretch of a road into the unmistakable site of a public meeting. Other organizers and speakers were just as clear in their insistence that the conference needed to be known, seen and heard by people. The question is: by whom? For whom was it that the chairs had been left empty and waiting? Who were the publics that the seminar sought to address, beyond the proximate perimeter of its road-side stage? If we read attentively the claims and accusations couched in the text of the pamphlet, the answer, I suggest, may be considered three-fold.

On one hand, in the moments where the seminar's narrative was couched in the universals of technical and legal lexicons (Sundaram 2010), all went as if its demands concerned a public of right-bearing, substantive citizens. *Make all contract workers permanent. Everyone needs to receive rations. All workers need social protection.* In those instants, the seminar's organizers performed as if they were speaking for, and addressing, people legally entitled to make claims of the government, and expecting it to respond to those claims by the simple virtue of living in a democratic regime – such that the seminar seemed to animate the street in a bid to engage with a public of entitled members of 'civil society' (Chatterjee 2004), from which reciprocal relation to the government would theoretically be guaranteed by law.

And yet, alongside this wider public of civil society, there was a contrasting, more restricted and empirically informed target to the texts on the pamphlet. By choosing to set up their seminar in Ennore's industrial belt, the organizers made it clear whom it was that their performance had to be known and sensorially perceived by: the workers employed at the industries across the street, those whom the pamphlet called the "labouring people", for whom chairs had been left vacant (and awaiting photographs), to whom the speakers called out, and whom the sketch of a worker crushed on the banner was meant to symbolise. With this proximate public in mind, I suggest, the pamphlet spelt out another, different set of demands to the government, marked by an uncompromising tone and a more expeditive style: *You can't pay anyone less than 18000 a month. The selling of government land to private companies has to be blocked. Stop changing workers laws that harm workers.* Those demands had more to do with 'contextual negotiation' (Chatterjee 2004) for immediate results, than with the entitled demands formulated by right-bearing citizens. From there,

scathing allegations followed, in a fiercer style: *There have been unjust work cancellations in L&T and BGR. The police are not letting people document the breaches of the law committed by these industries. Administration favours people who already own things.* According to those claims – which were simultaneously taken up by the participants in vehement chanting and sloganeering – the government had long foregone all contractual and legal obligations toward those who weren't "people who already own things". By boldly spelling out and reading out governmental violations and negligence, the seminar further addressed a public that expanded beyond the workers that were likely to hear and see the conference. Here, the seminar's organizers spoke to, and spoke as, members of governed, labouring, marginalized populations – and their demands resonated with those of the wider public of a "political society" cast aside from formal citizenship (Chatterjee 2004).

From there, the seminar can also be understood as addressing the government itself, engaging it as a possible interlocutor expected to respond to angry, persuasive negotiations over salaries and pensions (Mitchell 2012). This appeared strikingly when the policeman came and nonchalantly took a picture of the event, because, in Sundaram's explanation, it was expected that he would report on it to other governmental agencies. This resonates with Lisa Mitchell's characterization of protests in North India as a means for marginalized people to collectively "broadcast" their concerns into the "public sphere" (2011: 491) thereby not only effectively considering the government as an interlocutor, but also recognizing its "ability to intervene, adjudicate, and hear complaints" (2012:10; see Björkman 2015 for a discussion).

This three-fold address of the seminar leads me to two parallel lines of argument. First, I suggest that the demands spelt out at the seminar complicated the neat divide often drawn between the notions of 'civil society' and 'political society' in the context of India's postcolonial democratic regime, and as concepts that have been articulated by Partha Chatterjee (2004). As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, lively recent debates have criticized this binary (see Kumar 2022, Parry 2020, Mukherjee 2020, Gudavarthy 2012, Harrison 2012, Sundar and Sundar 2012, Coelho and Venkat 2009). In the example I have just described, the demands made of the government by the seminar's organizers and participants were partially couched in legal and civil terms, thereby articulating a painstaking request for inclusion in a larger citizenry – for participating as members of 'civil society'. Yet those demands were simultaneously tangled in dire and pressing livelihood concerns, as the seminar's speakers engaged in 'contextual negotiations' (Chatterjee 2004) for the access of

workers to relief and resources (such as minimal salaries, or annulation of police prosecution), overshadowing their own more abstract talk of rights and obligations. As Rahul Mukherjee (2020:30) writes, the conceptual pair 'political/civil society' remains "helpful in explaining general trends", but often begs further ethnography to show how, the relation of the government to those it seeks to govern changes and plays out.

Second, and following from this last point, I suggest that, rather than attempting to neatly fit the seminar in one or the other category, or to show exactly how its demands blurred or reframed the 'civil' and 'political society' divide, we might learn more by contextualizing "the ruse of collective political agency" (Chowdhury 2019: 201) that the seminar was a display of. The ethnography of the seminar demands us to pay attention to the *ways* by which the participants of the seminar formulated their claims and accusations. What matters to me here is *how* people managed to 'broadcast' their concerns in the public sphere, as this is what determined their relationship to the government, and what they might obtain or lose from it. This focus on forms of address, I argue, bring us back to Sundaram's curated probing of 'limits', which I started this chapter with, and it helps me characterize it as a means by which he (and others) engaged in a dynamic relationship with the government. Indeed, as Sundaram had put it with his familiar verve, speaking of the 'Conference for Clarity': "They [the police] think we are causing *piricannai* and we are saying it is them".

Probing the 'limit', as I will now show, worked through the site-specific, boastful aesthetics of a public address, as Sundaram and those in his stride skilfully played with the government's tolerance.

Probing the limits: a curated display

In his monograph *Tamil Oratory and the Dravidian Aesthetic* (2009), Bernard Bate focuses on the range of sensory and affective effects harnessed in the public meetings staged by political parties in Tamil Nadu, to persuasively argue that the very aesthetic and spatial layouts of such events were in fact highly political. By drawing a comparison between the design of those political events, and that of South Indian temple festivals (see Mines 2005), Bate identifies a set of aesthetic and spatial characteristics that gives form to those events: what he describes as the "saturation of the visual and aural fields", the "'maximal' quality of the interactions" and the staging of "territorial operations" (2009:78). As Bate suggests, by deploying such formal effects,

> "organizers hope to draw into the spaces of the meetings as many people as they can, thereby transacting with a maximal range of people. The primary speaker, too, engages literally as a maximal transactor . . . The greater the speaker, the greater the crowd, the greater the gifts, and the greater the meeting's extension both visually . . . and aurally" (2009:78)

The form of such an event, thereby, clearly cannot be separated from its content and message (religious or political), as its aesthetic (visual and aural) 'extension' in space becomes the sign and the equivalent of its importance. Bate, along with other scholars (Gerristen 2014, Pandian 1992, Widlund 2000, Pandian 2015, Cody 2020), has paid attention to large political parties that have a long lineage of organizing public events and meetings in Tamil Nadu. The seminar organized by Sundaram and CITU was more modest than such displays of electoral politics – yet, I suggest that the form and arrangements of the meetings organized by Sundaram and his colleagues still deployed performances and aesthetics that made them reminiscent of the more prestigious "politico-divine events" documented by Bate (2009: 74). Aesthetic and affective forms of address took precedence as the "Conference for Clarity" went forward. It was through those formal displays, more than through the exact content of their utterances, that they pushed to redefine the means of governance, probing the limits of the government's tolerance of them doing so. At the same time, the politics of perceptibility that Sundaram deployed reconfigured the coordinates of a certain "hierarchical intimacy" (Bate 2009:129) that the participants of the seminar shared with the government. Indeed, as Bate writes insightfully, the "state is never a neutral imagining but always an image to which we either tie ourselves in devotion or patriotic love or defy with parricidal hatred" (2009:120).

While the reader can view photographs of Sundaram's public seminar here (fig 14 and 15), they can also access this link to watch a video of some of what I have described thus far. The video recordings add sound and movement to the pictures, making more evident the ways in which the assembly attempted to 'saturate' the setting, 'maximize' visual and auditory displays, and interfere in space through curated 'territorial operations'.

Not only was the seminar 'saturated' visually – with the representations of the organizers and the party affiliations of their unions: on the banner, flags, and pamphlets – but it also overflowed aurally, through a succession of amplified speeches. By expanding the voices of the union leaders and delegates with a speaker system that outdid the drone of motorized traffic, the organizers sought to render 'maximal' the portent of the speeches, thereby hoping to also 'maximize' the number of spectators that might join the seminar as

participants. It was not only decibels that they pushed to a maximal quantum: the rhetorical ploys that the speakers devised were also qualitatively amplified, harnessing the tarnishing of politicians, governments and private enterprises with bold, defamatory statements. This enabled the persistent expression, I insist, of a shared 'feeling' of being wronged and abused. In the vivid accusations bellowed by the speakers, in an increasingly vehement way, the close-range public of a "labouring people" was addressed by means that foregrounded affective and aesthetic-sensorial registers over the rational, logical language of law and rights[29]. The point was to 'show' that contract workers, permanent employees and other salaried and non-salaried union members stood together in their demands for the state to adhere to and enhance specific strands of labour legislation. As when they angrily, passionately chanted:

The central government,

Modi's government,

Change your ways,

change your ways!

The tone grew fiercer still, as the AICP union leader motioned people to read the pamphlet carefully, then haranguing them (by collectively appealing to a shared "we") to "fearlessly" take up the "fight" against the government. The pinnacle was reached with Sundaram's hyperbolic charge: *There is murder on this government's hands*. As Bate puts it, "listening to a powerful speaker, one's skin ripples with speech, and ears ring for hours" (2009: 80). Bystanders became spectators and then participants, joining in the seminar to sit alongside the rest, as they gave their own voices and performances to the sloganeering and chanting. The effect was striking, as both orators and spectators/participants moved voice, gestures and postures in unison, their fists punching the air, their hands slicing it and their fingers waging defiantly as they rhythmically marked out verses, rhymes, and exclamations.

Even when momentarily static or silent, the male bodies of the spectators/participants unmistakably marked out the place as that of a 'public meeting'. Along with the speakers, I counted a couple dozen men in the attendance, their numbers increasing as the workday at the nearby petroleum gas facility ended. The entire seminar – the speakers, the spectators/participants, the bystanders, even the image of a worker being crushed by the

[29] Scholars have shown how affect is always part of even the most presumably formal and rational forms of politics, or of relations of a government to its subjects. (See Mazzarella 2009)

‘hands of the state’ on the top end of the banner – were indeed entirely comprised of men, as it is overwhelmingly the case in political assemblies across South Asia. (Chowdhury 2019: 17). In this strictly gendered setting, a range of other ‘territorial operations’ worked at levelling out the multiple meanings and uses of a place in Ennore’s industrial belt, by inscribing upon those the “simplex meaning of space architecturally constructed and choreographed by event organizers” (Bate 2009: 74). Carving out for themselves the unpaved sides of an arterial industrial road, the organizers had abruptly changed the usage of a space that, a few hours prior, had served for the continuous circulation of a range of vehicles: it had been turned into a stage awaiting an audience of workers from the neighbouring industries.

This final point on the seminar’s territorial operations enables me to return to the question of ‘limits’. As I later found out, the seminar was trespassing a series of legal rules that theoretically govern the organization of public events: in particular, the obligation to hold such meetings in standardised venues. And they had not considered it useful to request prior police permission, given that they would not, in any case, have been able to secure it. They had also considered it superfluous to control the volume to which the speakers’ voices were amplified (another legal requirement), knowing almost certainly that it would not trigger any police intervention.

On these matters, drawing on the experience of savvy tacticians such as Sundaram, the organizers were bargaining on the leniency and tolerance of the police. Despite rules and laws being broken, no serious ‘limits’ had been crossed. The naming and shaming of numerous politicians, including the incumbent prime minister, was perhaps the boldest move at playing with the Indian state’s low threshold for dissenting groups and forms of opposition (Gorringe and Damodaran 2020, Khaitan 2020, Jauregui 2016). Steered by Sundaram, the ‘Conference for Clarity’, in other words, was an exploration of the fraught possibilities of curating boastful aesthetic displays, through the addresses that those displays enabled. Limits, quite simply, were probed and played with that day – not crossed. This amounted to engaging with what I have termed in the introduction a politics of perceptibility, wherein a conception of ‘politics’ is intimately tangled with that of an ‘aesthetics’ (Rancière 2004).

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In the following section, I move on to the protest march that was organized by Sundaram and his colleagues as part of the ‘All India General Strike’. The protest can be read

as another, different example of Sundaram's tactical proficiency at navigating the limits. The protest march was also another site wherein the aesthetic displays that Bate speaks of were reinforced with further theatrical effects: what I call the threat of a crowd. Indeed, despite having been told by many participants at the event (including Sundaram himself) that the march was no more than a mere "show", I witnessed rising conflicts which intimated otherwise, pointing at the looming threat of an escalation out of the staged plot of "street theatre" (Bjorkman 2015b), and towards the unruly energies of the crowd (Chakrabarty 2007, Chowdhury 2019).

The railway protest

'This is just a show'

By the time my friend Arun[30] and I got to Minjur[31], a sizeable group of nearly forty protestors had already assembled by the side of the road – nestled together by the tea shops that hugged the large and busy state highway, close to the entrance of a railway station that was an important node, linking the national railway to Chennai's center, and to the north of country.

Following the Conference for Clarity's opening of the 'All India General Strike', different groups affiliated to multiple trade unions had participated in assemblies across Ennore and in the larger Chennai metropolitan region. They had protested outside the gates of the coal-fired thermal power plants, around the premises of private manufacturing units, and in the ship building yard that Surya held temporary employment at. The Minjur railway protest was to be the culmination of two days of strike which had aimed to present the trade unions as united in their efforts. The unions had issued threats that the striking workers would disrupt rail services by storming the station and blocking the train on their tracks.

When we reached Minjur that morning, I immediately spotted Sundaram standing with a few other union representatives and protestors, engaged in a cordial discussion with an on-duty policemen on site. A few members of the local and national press were also present.

[30] Arun was a friend of mine and a Tamil scholar. He had accompanied me as a research assistant for the railway protest to help me keep track of how the events unfolded.
[31] Minjur is an industrial township to the northwest of Ennore.

Around the group, different union flags floated their colours – quite a few brandishing the hammer and sickle symbol – as workers chatted amongst themselves, sipping cups of tea. Shortly after, a small group of women arrived on site in shared taxis. I overheard them commenting in a satisfied tone on how easy it had been to reach Minjur:

> "This is not like yesterday's strike", one woman said, "where I had to walk to the bus stop after the protest for nearly one hour in the sun. But today, luckily", she went on, "after the protest, I can even take the same train we will have blocked back home, once it's running again", drawing a laugh out of those around her.

Soon after, Mohan, a young contract worker at the private L&T shipbuilding yard, walked over to Arun and I, and introduced himself to us. He had recognized me from the public seminar a few weeks ago, he added. I explained that it was my research that brought me to both events, asking him, thereafter, if he believed that the railway strike would help push the government into accepting some of their demands.

> "What is there…", Mohan said. "We will go the railway station, get rounded up by the police, then get free lunch and tea, later we will be released. That is all this is… a show."

Perplexed by Mohan's blunt suggestion that the strike was only a "show" of no real consequence, I perhaps looked confused, and Mohan immediately reacted:

> "It is all that bastard Modi's fault. All the problems started with him. First, we need to throw him out to get what we want."

Then, pointing to the women who had joined the group of protestors, Mohan reasoned that if the women were out to voice their concerns, that was a clear sign of how "serious" the situation really was. The central government were "killing" workers, he said, supporting their favoured industrialists by making sure opportunities for work were only temporary, low-paid and without the legal mandatory benefits. That was what they were fighting against.

> "But L&T have agreed to some of our demands", he submitted at the very end. "They have responded in the press today. That is the good news", he added hopefully, hinting that the concessions earned from private-owned L&T might pave the way for the government-owned companies to also yield to the strike's pressure.

In the meantime, Tamizh, a senior engineer on a longer fixed term contract at the government owned Vallur Thermal Power Plant had joined Mohan, Arun and I. Tamizh dryly commented that the managerial staff he worked under had not responded favourably to their strike. They had threatened those who went on protest with the termination of their jobs and reacted particularly aggressively towards some of the lowest-paid contractual workers by

informing their subcontractors. But, to my renewed surprise, Tamizh echoed Mohan in insisting that the railway strike that was to commence that day was nothing more than a type of 'show' – for people to "make a name for themselves", he added. However, Tamizh also went on saying that to 'show' themselves protesting was still extremely important.

Sundaram strode over to us gleefully at that point and proceeded to incorrectly tell Mohan and Tamizh that I had come all the way from London to witness this protest. Before I could do much to correct his claim, Sundaram had already requested Tamizh and Mohan to assemble at the centre of the road, seemingly oblivious to the police officers standing within a few meters of us. In a matter of minutes, the group in the middle of the road grew into to about 60 people and a long queue of motorised traffic came to a halt. A few police officers immediately began to call out the protestors and order them to disperse straightaway. The protestors paid no heed to this. But then, one officer came up to the group and authoritatively reminded them that they had not received prior police permission for the strike, and would therefore undergo police detention. He further instructed them not to cross the barricades that were placed by the entrance of the railway station, warning the protestors that only if they followed this order would they be detained without force.

Sundaram stepped up to the officer and told him that the protestors would stand by his instructions and stay away from the station, trains and railway tracks. Then, he turned to the protestors, raised his voice, and appealed to them to make their complete set of demands heard, before they submitted voluntarily to police detention.

> "We are here with reason", Sundaram bellowed for all to hear. "We are pained by what this government is doing to us."

A cursory nod of heads sealed Sundaram's interaction with the police, as the officers moved to a midway point between the protestors and the barricades, watching the scene intently.

On the road, Sundaram issued indications and moved the protestors around to make a few adjustments. Senior members were called to the front and each of them began by chanting a few slogans, throwing their fists in the air in regular intervals. While a few protestors huddled on the sides, taking photographs, one union member barked out instructions to the crowd, telling them that they were to repeat after the lead voices, insisting that they all had to keep their flags as high as possible.

Figure 16. Brought to the front of the crowd, the senior union representatives are asked to commence proceedings by chanting slogans.

The sloganeering called for the government to "stop weakening labour laws!" and demanded that the central and state government "change their corrupt and dangerous ways!", repeating some of the lines from the Conference for Clarity. After this, Sundaram asked the women to come to the front of the group and instructed them to carry on with the sloganeering. A different banner, albeit holding similar information as the one from the public seminar, was passed on to the women, and they held it up in display. The media personnel, identifiable with their press badges, and many protestors too, intermittently broke from the group to record the proceedings of the event with their cameras and mobile phones. As the chanting gradually intensified, at one point, the whole group, with the women and the banner in the front, and the men and the flags immediately behind them, followed Sundaram's instructions to march forward, chanting louder with every step. Gathered at a distance, all the police officers stood silently, still watching on.

As the protestors approached the railway station barricades, a few police officers walked up to the senior union representatives in the first few rows and asked them to

conclude proceedings immediately – earlier than what had been decided upon. Sundaram, tasked with the role of negotiator, told the police officers that they still had not finished, and then, petitioned the protestors to begin another round of sloganeering. Simultaneously, many in the group let out their frustrations with the police by hurling accusations at the officers, raising their voices in the process.

In between, another union leader harangued the women to "bravely" march on all the way through to the barricades, claiming loudly that nothing bad would happen to them. Eventually, an argument broke out amidst the protestors as some of the women were simply not willing to carry on. "They are too scared!", a voice cried out.

In the middle of this, one man tried to run past the barricade on his own, hurling a union flag while doing so, and was stopped by a line of police officers, grabbed by the scruff of his shirt collar and violently shoved him into a detention van. This angered the protestors further and many hurled verbal abuse at the police. Sundaram rose in their midst and attempted to simmer rising tempers by loudly asking everyone to show restraint.

At the same time, a senior union leader had instructed some of the protestors, men and women, to sit down on the highway, yelling that if it was not the train that they ended up blocking, the road would serve their purpose.

Over the next twenty minutes, Sundaram shuttled from sitting on the ground with the protestors, to negotiating with the police officers to gain a few extra minutes for the protest to reach its conclusion. Simultaneously, the stream of traffic that had accumulated on either end of the highway had only grown more frustrated with each passing minute, as horns blared on with no sign of restraint.

A large crowd of spectators had also circled the protestors, raising the assembly's numbers to what seemed like nearly a hundred. The standing onlookers had mixed with the standing protesters such that I could hardly tell them apart. Men were taking photos and videos, a few even pointing their fingers at the policemen circling the seated protesters and laughing excitedly at their stunned and frustrated expressions.

This was the point where Sundaram stood up, and in all his oratory wrath raised his fists in the air and yelled:

> "This government is murdering its farmers and its workers! They have to change their ways if they do not want to make matters worse!"

The protestors seated behind him repeated his words a few times, the anger in their voices distinctly mounting, and Arun and I lost sight of the policemen's reaction for a moment, ourselves caried by the thrilling wave that was mounting steadily around us.

But suddenly, with one final round of sloganeering, Sundaram abruptly called out to the seated crowd that it was "over". The message rippled away from him to the rest of the protest, repeated and amplified by the other leaders. In a matter of minutes, the wave of excitement that had started to gush through us was replaced again by discernible, sequenced action.

Sundaram briskly instructed the seated protestors to rise from the road and get into the detention vans, calling out to the few who attempted to slip away unnoticed. Some protestors approached Sundaram and asked him wearily if the detention would warrant a police record and Sundaram assured them that it would not, calling out to all that it was more a procedure for the daily report that the local police station had to file at the end of each working day. In a playful tone, he coaxed some of them into getting on the vans by claiming that the food they would be served at the station would be tasty and in plenty.

As the protestors, men and women, got on the vans, somewhat numbed by the anticlimactic turn of events, I asked Sundaram if Arun and I could also join them, hoping to conduct a few longer interviews at the detention site. Sundaram responded that I would have nothing to do there, adding that I had witnessed everything that there was to see. Quickly, then, I went on to ask him if he was confident about the strike resulting in favourable outcomes for the workers.

> "Nothing like that", Sundaram brushed my question away. "What was this? This was just a show. Now we'll get detained, then we'll eat and then we'll be released. That is all. You saw everything."

In between his explanation, Sundaram paused to tell another union leader, who was getting onto one of the vans, to instruct all the detainees to "make a lot of noise" all along the way. Turning back to me after he passed on his instructions, and, before insisting once again that it was best that I only carried on with my day, he coyly added:

> "Just because they [the police] put us in a van, do they think we will keep quiet? Now they will know how much noise we can still make."

Adding, at the very end:

"Rishabh, we will still cause a lot of *piraccanai*. I will tell you. Don't worry. This is not the end. I will call you."

Figure 17. Tasked with leading the march, the women union members carried the banner as they moved towards the police barricades, supported by the rest of the protestors chanting loudly, flags raised in the air, marching steadily behind.

Probing the limits: theatrics and the threat of a crowd

Standing by the side of the road, as I numbly watched Sundaram persuade the protestors to get inside the police vans, I thought of how curated the protest had initially seemed – just like a well-orchestrated "show", as many protestors themselves claimed. The women's presence, in particular, disrupted the masculine gendered setting I had observed till then, offering a striking example of the tactics harnessed by Sundaram and his colleagues in designing the event. The women workers served to augment the protest's effects, as Mohan implied when he dismissed my suggestion that the women's own demands for better working conditions might have informed their choice to participate in the protest. Women were

commonly integrated in protests in such instrumental ways across India, and scholars have argued that women activists and union members are often unjustly tasked with negotiating the inconsistencies that arise from their presence being used by different political organisations, while also confronting rigid masculinist and patriarchal hierarchies that would reduce their political participation (Gorringe 2016, Dutta 2019, Chari 2004). While the women protested alongside the workers, adding to their numbers and partaking in their struggle, they were also pushed to the front line by the organizers in a bid to avoid police retaliation. As Sundaram explained candidly at a later time:

> "They [police officers] won't *lathi* [charge] the women. Because there will be big consequences if they do. This way, they also stay within their limit."

This exposes once more Sundaram's tactical expertise at probing the 'limit', in this case to maximize benefit and limit harm. The benefit generated in instrumentalizing women as tokens, here, would be increased perceptibility for the protest – and the harm kept at bay would be the looming threat of police brutality.

However, despite Sundaram's relentless mention of 'limits' to me, even during the protest itself, I was having a hard time locating any of them. Rather than real or metaphoric borders cordoning actions, limits were beginning to appear as discursive props for the protest's staged act. Take Sundaram's cordial, almost friendly negotiations with the police personnel on duty, as if they were agreeing upon a sort of performative middle ground, convening on a consensual script for the theatrics of the protest, such that everyone, police officers and protesters alike, could go home safe and sound at the end of the day. Consider the women's pun about how they might make their way home, later in the evening, on the very trains that the strike was meant to block. Picture the growing number of onlookers who joined in the assembly laughing at the obvious discomfort of the police officers standing closer. And take the multiple jokes about food and commensality that floated around the event, culminating in Sundaram's coaxing of the protesters into the detention vans by summoning the image of the tasty, free meals that they would be served at the police station. It seemed like everyone was playing the game of playing with the limit, and that some were even finding forms of fun and pleasure in it, questioning the fraught limit "between the serious and the frivolous" (Anjaria and Anjaria 2020).

But while many within the crowd were quick to suggest that the protest was no more than a harmless 'show', they simultaneously and paradoxically affirmed that, and acted as if, the protest held real political weight and meaning. Take Mohan's ambivalent statements: in

the span of a few minutes, he had moved from suggesting that the protest was only a staged, premeditated performance, a "show" that bore no real consequence towards achieving workers' goals (such as having their temporary positions turned permanent) – to describing the strike as a means to address the "serious", life-and-death matter of the government's "killing" of workers. As he put it, one could easily evaluate the seriousness and urgency of the workers' situation through the presence of women workers, and how craftily Sundaram and his colleagues had curated their presentation and arrangement. The threat of a violent incident was real, as those of the women who were frightened knew, and their mistrust of Sundaram's reassurances of no harm falling upon them was perhaps only wise.

As I argued in the previous section, the very form of a protest – its aesthetics, the performative and affective effects it can harness and generate – is political (Bate 2009). Here, it appears that there were two ways in which the political assembly coalescing by the railway station was generating its aesthetic/political effects. The first, had to do with 'theatrics' and the staging of a "show", while the second involved something threatening and looming, the growing wave of anticipation I felt in the penultimate moments of the protest, and could be summed up as the threat of a 'crowd'. Those two aesthetic modalities of political assembly overlapped and coexisted, I suggest, and they informed the oddly paradoxical account of the protest articulated by Mohan and others.

In her ethnography of a pair of protests staged by political parties in Mumbai to demand water access in low-income neighbourhoods, Lisa Björkman (2015b) draws on theatre studies to make sense of a similar, oddly discordant experience around the form of the event. She argues that the people present at the protests were also, and simultaneously its audience', which turned them into a "discerning" participant-audience of the "ostentatious" performance in play. From that vantage point, they were able to make out the strings that pulled and moved the performance, see its theatrics unfold, and imagine, guess, or hope for what direction those would eventually lead to. Björkman shows how the organizers themselves, despite staging and curating the event, could not hold it fully within the plot of their design – this was made evident by the starkly different ends met by each of the two protest she describes, despite their involving the same casts of actors. Björkman reminds us here that the performance of a political assembly can be thought of as an event "clearly choreographed to produce a desired outcome", while being simultaneously "something that has a particular and anticipated narrative structure but whose final outcome is not yet certain" (2015b:149). While in the case I describe, the demands and cast involved in the political assembly was different

(unionized workers and union representatives struggling for labour rights, as opposed to low-income urban residents and political party leaders demanding water connexions), all the people present at the railway protest (myself and Arun included) similarly appeared as simultaneously participants *and* audience of the event, a position from which we could perceive the protests for what it was: a deadly serious theatrical show.

But there was a moment when theatre shed off all playfulness. Despite the casualness performed by Sundaram when he chatted lightly with the officers, or the humour floating around the women protesters and targeting the dumb stares on the police's faces, there was something serious and dire also hovering at the protest. The threat of the 'street theatre' building into something more, loomed over the assembly – gushing both through the protest' organisers, and through the officers in charge of its policing. The police's efforts at manning the railway barricades, for one, spoke of the government's fear of an unruly crowd unexpectedly emerging from a peaceful protest, changing the script, and crossing all limits. Sundaram's perpetual, tactical coaxing of both protesters and police officers – louder here, less visible there –, spoke of a similar risk, and expressed his own bid to maintain the show at the limit's threshold, and to avoid the risk of a crowd reverting all of his carefully scripted plot.

In her monograph on crowd politics in Bangladesh, Nusrat Chowdhury (2019) explains that the "element of agency that makes the concept of public so attractive to democratic politics also constantly comes up against its own *limits* in existing scenarios, such as postcolonial South Asia, where, in many ways, the public is often viewed as a potential crowd" (Chowdhury 2019:35, my emphasis). The very risk (or hope) of an escalation into a crowd was then real enough – and I felt it myself – to texture the mood of the railway protest. Indeed, as Chowdhury writes, the "coming together of the crowd is an expressive function prior to any particular claim or utterance it may make" (2019:35). At the railway protest, it seemed that this expressivity resided even in what was only the *possibility* of an unruly crowd. The participant-audience's confidence in the political seriousness of the protest, even as they knew it to be a show, perhaps also indicates that people were aware, as philosopher Judith Butler puts it, that the very act of "showing up, standing, breathing, moving, standing still, speech, and silence are all aspects of a sudden assembly, an unforeseen form of political performativity (Butler 2015:18, cited in Chowdhury 2019:207).

Participants and spectators oscillated between these opinions – protest as show or protest as crowd politics? –, ridiculing the event in one instance, and participating

wholeheartedly in the next, because they knew that ‘showing up’ could entail politics. In an edited collection on the “shared commitments and communities of practice” (2022:5) produced by the circulation of leftist art forms across postcolonial South Asia, Lotte Hoek and Sanjukta Sunderason insist convincingly that aesthetic forms “draw our attention due to their break with convention, their repetition of something familiar incorporating the unexpected” (2022:19). In other words, curated forms – which we might extend to that of the artfully staged ‘street theatre’ of the railway protest – affect us because of their capacity for both generating “embodied ways of knowing the world and unsettling our familiarity with that world” (2022:19). The limit between frivolity and seriousness, then, was indeed a theatrical prop, for the protest’s participant-audience: inserted in the script, it caused it to hover repeatedly between familiarity and the unexpected.

What remained constant, however, was Sundaram’s mastery over the orchestration of the events. Björkman argues that the street theatre of protests is an ideal playground for the “adept mediation of the city’s dense networks of power and authority is performed and instantiated” (2015b). While she describes participant-audiences (who, in her case, double up as voters) as the adept mediators of the protest, in my own case, Sundaram embraced the mediator role with all the talent of a rooky actor, with ‘ostentatious display’ – including the contained threat of a crowd – the very tactic he was deploying to meet his ends.

But while it seemed that Sundaram had succeeded in channelling the energy of the crowd (Chakrabarty 2007) into his own design of the event, even he could not foresee all possible ‘accidents’ (Chowdhury 2019: 95-125, Bear 2014b).

Detention

As both vans filled up and left, the barricades were dismantled, and traffic resumed to normal – when Arun and I were suddenly confronted by two police officers and told that we were also to be detained. Before we could make sense of what was happening, we were escorted in a separate police car and driven to the local police station. On the way to the station, the lead officer asked us why we were at the protest march, and I told him that it was part of my research project a doctoral student, explaining that Arun joined me as my field assistant. When I asked him, in turn, why we were being detained, the officer responded:

> "We do not know who you are. It is for verification. In case you are a journalist… or if you are carrying out anti-government activities. We do not know."

The officer's incrimination was inserted casually in response to my query, but it shot an icy feeling through my chest. To hear such an accusation made nonchalantly by an officer of the state, without any provocation or evidence, only because he did not know who Arun and I were, brutally undid the casualness that had largely informed the protest march.

At the police station, I gave the Station Officer (SO) my student card and insisted that Sundaram could vouch for both our presence. We were then asked to wait in the back of the station.

After a nervy twenty minutes, Sundaram and some other union colleagues appeared, and, on seeing Arun and I, began laughing. It felt as if a bubble of tension had burst. Sundaram walked into the SO's office and confirmed that I was a student researcher who was invited to the protest march. Content with his explanation, the SO then told Arun and I that we were free to leave, even apologizing for having taken up some of our time.

> "We must do our job, you see", the SO then said. "Many *elements* [in English] are there outside. To keep you safe only we did this verification."

All of a sudden, Sundaram's demeanour shifted. In a sharp tone, he was quick to ask the SO why Arun and I had been brought to the station and not detained like the others, if we were deemed a supposed threat. The officer responded just as sharply that there was a verification check that was required as we were also present at the march. But then, insisting that it would have been all the more reason for Arun and I to be detained in the same quarters as the rest of them, Sundaram and a few other union representatives sparked a rather heated exchange with the SO. Arun and I were ushered out of the station by another union leader – insisting it was best we stayed out of it from now on.

Sundaram walked out eventually, accusing the police of using their powers arbitrarily, taking Arun and I all the way back to the community hall that served as their detention centre. After we got there, Sundaram asked me if I was doing okay and I told him that I was a bit unnerved by what had happened but was largely doing alright. He patted my shoulder:

> "You have to be careful these days. What to do? They [the police] can do anything. But mostly, for small things like this, they won't cross the *limit* [in English]."

With that curious quip, Sundaram told me he had to go back into the community hall, asking me to get back safely to the city. He would call me soon, he insisted as always, loudly

explaining to the on-site police officers at the hall as he walked back in that I was a researcher "from London" who was interested in the work the union was doing in Ennore and that if they ever saw me again, they should do well to leave me alone.

Later, as Arun and I stood beside our bike, sipping tea from the stall next to it, we had no words to exchange.

Politics by accident

In a recent lecture, writer and activist Arundhati Roy (2022) draws a stern picture of the situation surrounding political activism and dissent in contemporary India:

> "All dissent has been criminalized in India. Until recently, dissenters were called anti-national. Now we are openly labelled intellectual terrorists. The dreaded Unlawful Activities Prevention Act, under which people are being held for years without trial, has been amended to accommodate the current regime's obsession with intellectual terrorism. We have all been branded Maoists – the colloquial term for us is Urban-Naxals, or jehadis, and have had targets drawn on our backs, making us fair game for mobs or legal harassment." (Roy 2022)

As Harini Amarasuriya and colleagues write, acts of dissent imply "not just strong dissatisfaction, but also determined and open opposition" (2020:2). As such, the Indian government's goal is not merely to counter those who dare 'refuse' the current social and political organization (Simpson 2017), but increasingly to squash the 'openness' of dissent. In India's current heated political climate, the government has taken to retaliate in the public sphere and on the terrain of ideology, attempting to discredit and cast slur on acts of dissent that it cannot keep quiet, flagging dissidence as 'terrorism'. From political rallies, to debates on news television channels, to the plethora of digital social media platforms, such terms as 'anti-nationals' and 'intellectual terrorists' have become part of the mainstream. This lexicon is a potent tool in what some have called the "culture wars" (Fassin 2021) waged in other parts of the world such as France, the United-States, Brasil or the United-Kingdom[32].

And yet, the situation in India stands out as particularly dire, as the government does not hesitate to brutally clamp down on dissenters (Roy 2022). This usage of violence and

[32] To cite but one example, consider French president Emmanuel Macron's recent charge of intellectual dissenters as "breaking the republic in two", fuelled by mainstream media's circulation of the term "islamo-leftist" as a throwaway category to lump in critical intellectuals and scholars (Fassin 2021).

paralegal ploys upsets, once more, the political/civil society divide, with forceful governmental retaliation no longer limiting itself to marginalized populations. Instead, in a cynical game of mirrors, people classically thought of as members of civil society – such as students, middle-class urban residents, NGO workers, artists, scholars, intellectuals, or politicians – are cast by the government as un-civil "elements" (in the SO's word), and as a terrorist threat to the democracy which the government is supposed to protect (see also Shah forthcoming).

This was the deeply troubling context in which Arun and my own arrest took place, and it explains our queasiness at being put in detention, as well as Sundaram's final, stern warning: *you have to be careful these days*. What it does not explain fully, however, is the sequence that unfolded before that warning, when Sundaram came to 'rescue' us at the police station. At first, Sundaram burst out laughing, on seeing the pair of Arun and I – the two of us skinny, long-haired, nonchalantly dressed young scholars – in a prostrated seat inside the station. His first guess was that we had simply been taken in together with the rest of the protesters, and he laughed at the officers' mistaking us for unionized workers. But then, the SO's comment cast a chill on the room – *many 'elements' are there outside* –, and it seemed that Sundaram had suddenly realized what our being detained in a separate room really meant. Far from being a mistake, we had been seen for what we could very likely be: dissenting intellectuals, 'anti-nationals'. What followed was an angry demonstration of Sundaram's wrath. It ended when Sundaram exited the police station and made a vocal demonstration of power over the SO, as he loudly assured me that never again would I be bothered by the police if they ever saw me in Ennore. Sundaram then regained his temper and his usual countenance: sure of himself, authoritative and fatherly, he patted me on the arm and reassured me that I was out of harm's way.

As should be clear by now, Arun's and my own participation in the protest was in no way a planned act of dissent – it was field work. But by our mere presence, and its visual contrast with that of the factory workers and union representants, Arun and I had unsettled the anxieties of the government, triggering a response that departed from all prewritten scripts. By 'accident' and not by design, our presence, I suggest, had been an act of 'crossing the limit'.

In a reflection on the many events retrospectively cast as "accidents" in political movements against open-pit coal mining in Bangladesh, Chowdhury (2019) argues for paying more attention to the "interpretive possibilities" raised by stories of accidents and taken up by

their publics. Accidents can be rewritten in the "core script" of protests, despite – or perhaps because of – their absence from all preliminary plans (2019:118). Yet accidents can just as often be recast in narratives as nothing more than "spectacular signs in the public sphere" (Bear 2014), deprived of the force of politics that can be generated from their aesthetic and affective charge. This shows that just "who gets to relegate politics to the domain of the accidental is a question of power" (Chowdhury 2019:125), with 'accidental' here synonymous with 'random' and 'failed'. Instead of casting off and depoliticizing accidents as merely 'acccidental', Chowdhury insists eloquently that we would gain a finer understanding of the workings of political assemblies, if we were to take seriously "the cultural work that accidents do in forging or splintering societal life" (2019:99). Laura Bear (2014 b) makes a linked suggestion in urging ethnographers to take a sidestep and spend more time considering the "everyday life" of accidents, to uncover their place in the 'normal' (however paradoxical this may seem) workings of the situations in which they unfold, thereby questioning the narratives that too often cast accidents as only random failures.

In the story of the accident I just recounted, Sundaram deployed one final tactical prowess. While he was aware of the gravity of the situation around Arun and my detention, Sundaram eventually built on the accident of our detention to show – through a heated performance of authoritative wrath – that he was the one in control, and not the police officers at the Minjur station. In the end, he had managed to reverse the situation and turn it to his advantage. After an unnerving sequence, all was safely back within the 'limit'.

Conclusion

The ethnography in this chapter has foregrounded three situations of political assembly, all tied within the umbrella event of the 'All India National Strike': a seminar called the Conference for Clarity, a protest at the Minjur railway station, and a police detention following that protest.

During the seminar, Sundaram and his colleagues harnessed select aesthetic, affective and performative forms not only to flag illegalities, but also, to directly address the government and request a response from it (Mitchell 2012). In doing so, they were not interested in contesting the government's sovereignty "so much as mobilizing the apparatus of the state to particular ends" (Björkman 2015b). At the same time, the politics of perceptibility that Sundaram deployed reconfigured the coordinates of the "hierarchical intimacy" (Bate 2009:129) that the participants of the seminar shared with the government.

At the railway protest, the participants and spectators I spoke to shuttled from suggesting that events like public conferences and rail blockades were no more than mere spectacles, to also affirming that such events were crucial acts of politics whereby demands of the government were made, where names of politicians were tarnished, where the government's ways of working were made visible. Yet both, seemingly contradictory positions, were in fact compatible, if we consider how the medium of the crowd – whether actualized, or only looming as a threat – could be harnessed by savvy navigators such as Sundaram.

While the seminar and the protest both staged Sundaram's expertise at causing *piracannai*, the limit was only probed and played with during those events, not crossed. An accident occurred at the end of the railway protest where this changed: my friend Arun and I were placed in police detention, under suspicion of being so-called 'anti-national elements'.

Part 3. *Proof*

In the sole chapter that makes up Part 3, I examine a health activist's efforts in garnering 'proof' that Seppakkam — a village located by the ash pond of a power plant in Ennore — actually 'existed'.

Figure 18. Two activists walk up the ash pond by the village of Seppakkam

Chapter 5: Living on an Ash Pond

A ‘ghost town’ full of life

The road leading to the village of Seppakkam followed a series of transformers that towered over layers of caked ash. Often, while on the way to Seppakkam (See Figure 18 & 19), one would also witness floods of ash slurry gush out from the corroded pipes that drained the power plant’s toxic refuse by the village. On my first visit to the village, as I accompanied a young doctor and health activist named Ramya down that road, I was described an even drearier image. Speaking about Seppakkam, Ramya said:

> “The village looks like a ghost town. Like ones you see in the movies. When we get there, you’ll understand what I mean. You’ll also say the same.”

I remember quite clearly the uneasy feeling of walking on hardened ash, smelling the putrid air that was drenched with soot. Around us, almost everything was both grey and dreary, both hot and wet, both hard and granular. Ramya, however, having spent many months working on a health report for the village’s residents, quickly went on to remind me that people still lived in the village, suggesting that the “ghost town” was in fact full of life.

> “They’re hoping this report will change things”, she added, pointing to the document she held in her hands, which had been drafted as a request from the residents. “It is very clear that they are suffering major health consequences because of the ash pond. Relocation is a must.”

Seppakkam’s residents, I already knew, lived in direct proximity to the power plant’s landfill or what is otherwise also called an ‘ash pond’. Ash ponds, fundamentally, are artificial embankments dug into large tracts of land to contain both toxic bottom ash and residual fly ash. In Ennore, all the by-products that arose from combusting coal in the power plants was either flushed out in slurry form through the metal pipes I described in opening paragraph or were collected and transported in granular form through large trucks to the site of the ash pond. While there were no boundary walls or fences to mark out this ash pond near Seppakkam, the overwhelming presence of ash made it impossible to miss. There existed, however, numerous prescribed demarcations on paper that were ratified by different departments at TANGEDCO and at the Tamil Nadu government, and which approved the ash pond’s existence — despite its disputed compliance with environmental regulations. For Ramya, indeed, everything about the situation was ‘wrong’.

> “With all that ash” she submitted again, “you will see what I mean!”

When we eventually reached Seppakkam, having walked past the series of ash laden roads that were unevenly leveled by the movement of heavy vehicular traffic (from the transportation of fly ash from the power plant's premises to the ash pond and then from the ash pond to different cement factories), Ramya pointed to the skeletal half-built figure of the new Ennore SEZ power plant[33] that towered over the ash pond on the other side of the village, and said:

"That is all the government sees! For them, only that is important."

The residents of Seppakkam, Ramya then went on to claim, shared a similar sentiment. They too frequently questioned why the government chose to build a new power plant on the ash pond near their village without consulting them. But the answer, Ramya exclaimed, was only obvious. Even in plain sight, she widened her eyes as she made her point, TANGEDCO and the Tamil Nadu government chose not to "see" the village of Seppakkam, as this meant they could continue dumping the power plant's toxic waste there, even build a new power plant "over the villagers heads", without enduring the costs of Seppakkam's residents' relocation. Her confidence rang clear in her explanation of the situation, and it was transmitted to her determination about what needed to be done. It was simple, she told me:

"We want to show that Seppakkam exists."

•

In this chapter I detail the practices by which Ramya, together with other health professionals and environmental activists, and with Seppakkam's own residents, attempted to confirm the village's 'existence'. As I will detail in the first section of this chapter, it was TANGEDCO and the Tamil Nadu government that were the intended audience of this confirmation. At the time of my fieldwork, while both the existing ash pond and the new SEZ power plant project had been given governmental sanction, and therefore appeared on a number of official maps and reports, Seppakkam was all but absent from those documents. It is important to note here that the new power plant was approved to be constructed over an ash pond that had been authorized many years earlier, to hold the refuse of an older plant. The new power plant project thus added to past points of contestation and mobilization for Seppakkam's residents and for the activists who took up their cause. Were the villagers not

[33] This was the same power plant that Sundaram and I had visited for his negotiations with BHEL (Chapter 3).

living right next to the ash pond, they all asked, and therefore should their presence not have been taken into consideration when authorizing such large-scale infrastructure projects?

Thus, for the activists, the compilation of a health report was an attempt to challenge the government's erasure of the village from official maps and documents. Through following my own 'paper trail'[34], as the first part of this chapter shows, I came to understand that what mattered — as the activists and Seppakkam residents already knew —, was not whether Seppakkam existed, but that 'proof of its existence' was made available, and came within range of the government's attention. Thereby, I argue that, for the activists, showing that Seppakkam existed fundamentally meant making perceptible a link between the village, its residents, their bodies and the power plants. And, there were three ways in which this happened, which I explore in turn as the chapter unfolds.

In the second section, I begin by showing how the activists compiled what they called in shorthand a 'health report', as documentary proof of the effects that the power plants had on Seppakkam's residents: on their bodies, lives and livelihoods. The next section goes on to set the stage for a 'health conference', where affective reaction was solicited in response to a range of discursive, emotional and sensorial elements of evidence: all gathering in what I call 'affective proofs'. The fourth section follows along with the practical experiment of a health camp where doctors and NGO activists sought to generate medical evidence that would further detail this link between bodies and power plants, through x-ray prints and blood pressure readings.

Finally, in the last section before a short conclusion, I explore the effects which the residents and the activists sought to entice with the 'proofs' of Seppakkam's existence. The NGO's clearly stated its purpose was to urge TANGEDCO into relocating Seppakkam's residents away from the ash pond. But not all residents agreed entirely with that goal. While they mainly shared with the activists the notion that the government should, somehow, take them into consideration and extend its protection and care to them, they did not all see relocation as the only desirable exit to their plight. Indeed, many residents also expressed their desire to have to access permanent employment at the new power plant as a secondary option. Through those desires, I argue, they sought to preserve the problematic 'intimacies'

[34] Chu (2010) speaks of the "paper trails" which are put together and followed along by aspiring Chinese migrants seeking to find work abroad. While my own trail was definitely more limited in scope, I borrow Chu's evocative expression to denote a path I undertook, engaging closely with documents till I reached a point utterly unforseen at the start of my journey.

(Weston 2017) that their bodies had developed with the ash pond around them in exchange for legitimized contribution to the power plants construction and operation.

Figure 19. The ash pond by the village of Seppakkam, built over spaces that were once vibrant wetland ecosystems, dispersed with salt pans and mangrove forests.

‘Paper Trails’

Before I first visited Seppakkam with Ramya, when she carried copies of the health report clenched under her arm, I had spent many days working through the official documents and paperwork that eventually led to the authorization of TANGEDCO’s new SEZ power plant. I cringed against the glare of numerous PDF reports shining bright on my computer screen amidst the summer heat, as Ramya and her team had given me access to

their NGO's existing database[35], in which most of the documents pertaining to the power plant had been procured through the 2005 Right to Information Act[36].

Annelies Riles insists that the interest an ethnographer's interlocutors show in documents can be "contagious" (2006: 7-8). One way for the ethnographer to attend to their burgeoning interest can be "straight-on", Riles suggests, "in the guise of self-reflexivity or critique". But another way can be "lateral", by which Riles means: more ethnography (ibid.). In spending time with Ramya and her colleagues, I was "laterally" compelled to my desk, my fieldwork turned into the study of the endless list of PDFs that the NGO had procured for their campaign work, as I filled my field diaries both with descriptions of those documents, and with accounts of my responses to those.

At first, I focused on individual documents in isolation, making sense of the various types of reports, petitions and clearances that were required to build an energy infrastructure project such as a coal-fired thermal power plant. Later, I traced these documents chronologically, being able to map out how different central and state government departments required and responded to TANGEDCO proposals and reports. This allowed me to lay bare TANGEDCO's subscription to different government regulations on paper, which eventually granted the public company with the clearances needed to commence construction work. Thus, as I witnessed the Ennore SEZ power plant surface from the center of the ash pond in Ennore, a looming structure of steel and concrete that stood gauntly over a field of ash, I was simultaneously becoming aware of how the documents that sanctioned the plant's presence detailed other stories — ones that unfolded on paper, circulated in print and accessed as digital copies.

I realized that one particular document garnered a lot of interest from the members of the team working on Seppakkam: the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) report, stemming from a study that determined the feasibility of infrastructure projects like the SEZ power plant. The interest, here again, was contagious, and I immersed myself in the workings of the EIA. To commence a project like a thermal power plant in any state in India, an Environmental Impact study is mandatorily required by the Ministry of Environment and

[35] The NGO Ramya worked with comprised of a small team of environmental and health activists. They continue to work in Ennore as of today and my fieldwork initially began with me having collaborated with their campaign to regulate TANGEDCO from getting away with flouting pollution control norms.
[36] The 2005 Right to Information act is a law passed by the parlement of India that allows citizens to request information from any public authority.

Forests (MoEF) at the federal level. When a project proposal reaches the MoEF, the ministry selects an Expert Appraisal Committee and charges it with studying the project's compliance with different environmental regulations. The Committee, firstly, on reviewing the proposal, publishes what is called a Terms of Reference — the specific criteria by which the environmental impact study needs to be conducted. Next, on receiving the terms of reference, many companies (TANGEDCO, in the case of Ennore's new SEZ power plant) generally tend to contract one amongst a host of governmentally accredited private consultancy firms to conduct the Environmental Impact study, handing them the Terms of Reference to do so. Thereafter, on completion of the study, the MoEF's Expert Appraisal Committee receives and examines the drafted EIA report to assert whether the project is deemed fit enough to receive an Environmental Clearance Certificate (ECC). If the Committee judges the report as unsatisfactory, it responds by expressing its concerns with the feasibility of the project, sometimes redrafting the Terms of Reference to demand an extended and more comprehensive Environmental Impact study. In certain cases, the project is denied clearance altogether and the company initiating the project is asked to reinitiate the process in entirety, and to submit a fresh proposal with reconsidered components for its infrastructure project. On the other hand, if an EIA report is deemed satisfactory by MoEF's Expert Appraisal Committee, the report itself is validated as a document that details many important aspects of the project, reviewed and reevaluated over many months of bureaucratic exchange, eventually reaching a stage where the impact study is understood as desirable, and the project deemed feasible for construction. The subsequent conditions that the Expert Committee formulates, attached with the ECC, are written in response to the final EIA report and thus both documents (the ECC and the EIA) frame the larger conditions by which the project is granted clearance from the government.

For the Ennore SEZ power plant, the final EIA report clearly states that there was no land acquisition required for the project as the power plant was to be built over reacclimated parts of an ash dyke that was already in TANGEDCO's possession (EIA 2011).The report also goes on to claim that a socio-economic study had been conducted in the towns and villages that fell within a ten-kilometer radius of the project site (Ibid), as the Expert Appraisal Committee, in the initial Terms of Reference for the EIA report, had demanded this socio-economic study be conducted. Moreover, in the ECC, it was stated rather boldly that the "project proponent shall also adequately contribute in the development of the neighbouring villages" (ECC 2014). To this effect, the final EIA report lists twenty-three

different towns and villages that were supposedly subject to their study and, also, classified these towns and villages as future beneficiaries of various outreach initiatives.

However, as I scrolled down my PDF copy of the EIA, I made what seemed like a bizarre discovery: Seppakkam did not feature on the list of potentially affected villages. I could not believe it: how could a settlement of close to sixty houses, perched on the sides of the ash dyke, hugging the corners of the SEZ plant's construction site, not fall within the ten-kilometer study area? It appeared to me as if all of the report's careful descriptions of the proposed site for the new plant —including the precise coordinates of the ash pond on a topographical map, details of distances to different water bodies, page long list of villages that were to be safeguarded from perilous effects of heavy construction work — only served the representation of a particularly partial, governmentally sanctioned landscape" one in which all traces of Seppakkam had quite bluntly been erased.[37] When I reported this discovery to the rest of the team, they appreciated my candor but laughed off my enthusiasm by telling me this was something they already knew. For them, the explanation to that puzzle was simple, as Ramya immediately exposed to me: Seppakkam's striking vicinity with the proposed construction site for the plant would clearly have posed a bureaucratic conundrum for the approval of the EIA and ensuing of an ECC. Thereby, it had simply and deliberately been rendered non-existent on paper.

Over the past years, political anthropologists have increasingly turned their attention to the abundance of paperwork and bureaucratic proceedings that support and surround governmental practices. [38] Akhil Gupta (2012), writing on the Indian state, has shown how workings of the bureaucracy, especially in its arbitrary decision-making practices that are sometimes channeled through paper documents, depoliticize acts of violence on poorer citizens. Similarly, in writing about the planned city of Islamabad (Pakistan), Matthew Hull (2012 A) has insisted that documents be taken seriously as objects of ethnographic observation, to unveil how paper and other graphic supports can work as ambivalent sites of mediation between governments and the people they seek to administer. As Hull argues

[37] In the published minutes of the public hearing that was conducted by the private consultancy that was tasked with producing the EIA report, it is written that a resident from a neighboring fishing village, while giving her consent to the project, explains that the village of Seppakkam is also located by the power plant's project site. She only requests that a road and drinking water be made available to the residents of Seppakkam as a result. This is the only place I found mention of Seppakkam. The EIA report and ECC themselves, however, never mentionned the village in the main body of text.

[38] For a historic account of the British Raj and colonial-era practices of writing and documentation, please refer Bhavani Raman's (2012) book *Document Raj: Writing and Scribes in Early Colonial South India.*

(2012 B), documents do not only describe pre-existing situations, but they also produce new realities, with effects that can be highly contrasted[39]. For example, Lisa Björkman's research (2021) in the context of Mumbai's Slum Relocation Schemes speaks of the impossibility to tell "fakeness" apart from "realness" when it comes to bureaucratic practices that are meant to assert residents' rights to being shifted to permanent housing. As photocopies (and copies of copies) of allotments slips were circulated across the city, Björkman shifted her attention from assessing the elusive authenticity of those documents, to observing what effects they wrought for those who considered them as "proof". The EIA I discovered in the NGO's database figures as one such document tangled in both "fakeness" and "realness". Officially validated, with all traces of forgery concealed, the EIA played a fundamental role in giving sanction to the new power plant's construction, while presenting the government as accountable — in particular, through erasing any "proof" of Seppakkam's existence.

Similarly, attending to governmental documentary practices, Nusrat Chowdhury (2014) describes recent attempts by the Bangladeshi state to move toward more "transparency" in its relations to its citizens by introducing ID cards together with various bureaucratic techniques of population management. Those transparency practices are only apparently at odds with the concealing and erasing practices I observed around Seppakkam. Indeed, Chowdhury shows how the state's bid to "engage its citizens in mutual recognition" comically failed in the case of ID cards that fell short at seriously locating and identifying people, generating more opacity in the process. This ultimately illustrates, as Chowdhury argues, how opacity can be created by the same bureaucratic instruments that seek to increase visibility, what Das and Poole (2004) have described as "the inherent illegibility (...) of governmental practices, documents, and words". Similarly, in my own case, I understood Environmental Impact reports as documents that were supposed to render transparent the possible health and environmental risks of state-sanctioned infrastructural projects, thereby making the government accountable in case those risks were overlooked and the construction went on unhindered. But because of the erasure of Seppakkam and the heavy tampering with what counted or not as the landscape of the site within which the plant would be inserted, the EIA

[39] A Foucauldian approach to how documents produce the realities that they attempt to describe could also have been adopted here. But as Annelise Riles suggests (2006:11-13), it can tend to overdetermine the extent to which see documents as doing the work of power, this "hegemony of document technology" somewhat blinding us to the other practices that documents can be a basis for.

and ECC issued for the new SEZ plant had starkly different effects: they completely opacified the governmental practices they were supposed to illuminate.

And so, I realized that when Ramya had claimed that TANGEDCO and the Tamil Nadu government had chosen not to "see" the village of Seppakkam, her statement was to be taken quite literally. The village's striking vicinity with the proposed construction site for the plant would clearly have posed a bureaucratic conundrum for the approval of the EIA and the ensuing of an ECC. Thereby, it had simply and deliberately been rendered non-existent on paper. It was because of this obliteration of the village's coordinates in paper and digital formats of both the EIA and the ECC, with no written or graphic record or any geographic or socio-economic data that could have also testified to Seppakkam's existence, that the SEZ power plant was able to rise freely in Ennore — piling layers of coal ash on people who supposedly did not exist.

Moreover, it is within this context that the 'health report' that Ramya had worked at compiling demands attention. Designed to tackle the consequences of the absence of Seppakkam from a governmentally sanctioned document like the EIA, the 'health report' was an attempt to make the government "see" the village and its residents. The report, in other words, was to stand as documentary 'proof' that Seppakkam was located by the ash pond. Let me now detail this last point by returning to the visit Ramya and I made to Seppakkam, in which the residents and I caught a glimpse of what the 'health report' contained.

The Health Report: paper proof

As soon as Ramya and I got to the village, we met Devi, a young woman in her late twenties, and her brother, a man who was a few years younger than Devi, at their home — a small two-room cement house that sat on the periphery of the ash pond. Immediately, Ramya handed over copies of the health report to them and explained that the data she had accumulated over many previous visits, including the survey and interviews (which seven out of 170 residents had participated in) had been worked into the report. While Ramya only had reports in English to hand out that day, she confirmed to everyone that the Tamil reports were still being worked on, and that she would soon come again to deliver them to Devi. She charged me with doing my part at passing around copies, and at translating as much of it as I could.

I quickly scanned the first page which listed the NGO's findings. They equated uncompromisingly the proximity of Seppakkam to the power plants with the disastrous health and economic situation faced by its residents:

> *1. Residents in the village face severe illnesses due to the presence of the coal ash ponds and thermal power plants in the vicinity.*
>
> *2. Air, water and land has been contaminated by fly ash dust and slurry from coal ash pond and this has resulted in the decline of health status among the residents.*
>
> *3. Many individuals work in industries around the village bear additional burden of occupational exposure.*
>
> *4. There are no basic facilities such as public transportation, drinking water, schools, health care facilities, in the village or in a 3-5 Km radius. People travel at least 5 to 6 kilometres to access these facilities.*
>
> *5. The prevalence of intense health problems in the region necessitates frequent visits to the doctors. The residents spend major portion of their monthly income on the health related expenditures and often incur financial debts (Health Report, 2018)*

The report listed page after page of what it called "phenomenological" evidence in support of Seppakkam' existence — the presence of the coal ash ponds and thermal power plants in the vicinity; the industries around the village; no basic facilities ...in a 3-5 Km radius. Point after point sought to inscribe in black letters on white paper that Seppakkam was there, undeniably located in the same place as the plants and the ash pond.

As I summed up one of the points in the report, Devi responded in dismay that the new plant's construction had even resulted in the ash pond swelling in size and swallowing parts of Seppakkam's eastern edge, eating up the village land, and making more and more people fall sick. Holding on to a copy of the report, Devi then went on to tell Ramya:

> "Thank you for writing this. We hope this will change things for us."

Ramya, immediately insisting that there was no reason for Devi to thank her, explained that the health report was only the first step in a much longer process, at the end of which stood an outcome that was explicitly stated in the report:

> *Relocate the affected residents of Seppakkam to a safe environment in consultation with the community. (Health Report, 2018)*

Proceeding to ask Devi and her brother to note down the dates of the health conference that was being organized in the city a few weeks later, she explained that doctors, journalists, and other important activists from across India and Tamil Nadu, were to meet soon under a

nationwide campaign titled ‘Doctors for Clean Air’. The situations in Ennore, and in Seppakkam more specifically, were going to be central to the conference, Ramya told the residents. A field visit to Seppakkam would even follow, with the doctors and experts themselves coming here, attesting that what the report contained was true, and subsequently signing a petition to demand that TANGEDCO take action. A loud round of approval erupted as Ramya went on:

> *Ramya*: “If they [TANGEDCO] see that many doctors have signed a petition with the report then there is more weight to it. That is the logic.”
>
> *Devi*: “That is correct. They’ll listen to doctors. We’ve tried so many times to speak to TANGEDCO but they don’t see us at all.”
>
> *Devi's brother* [interjecting]: “Exactly! How many times have we gone? It is like we don’t exist”.
>
> *Devi*: “They [TANGEDCO] know we are here. They have always known. But they still did not inform us that a new power plant is coming up over our houses.”

•

I was struck by Devi’s sharpness at expressing the situation of Seppakkam, as she simultaneously claimed that “*they don’t see us at all...”* together *“they know we are here... they have always known”.* Her words echoed in me as the reiteration of what I had discovered in reading the EIA: that it did not matter whether Seppakkam was “here”, as the government, in fact, knew it was. What mattered was whether there existed ‘proof’ of the village’s existence, in such a way that the government would finally have no choice but to “see” it and its residents.

Devi and her brother powerfully expressed their hopes of the possibility that the health report might act as such indisputable, documentary, “paper proof” of their existence. However, the “paper proof” exemplified by the health report was not the only tactic unfolded by those who sought to make Seppakkam perceptible to the government. The following section takes us to a ‘Doctors for Clean Air’ conference in the centre of Chennai. Despite being a completely different setting from the ash pond and drawing together a new cast of people — including doctors from high-end clinics in Delhi — the conference became another site in which attempts were made to evidence Seppakkam’s existence by the Ennore power plants. This enables me to trace a second kind of proof, one that sought to operate not through the bluntness of ink printed on paper and circulated on PDF, but through the feelings and

affects generated by "sympathetic" encounters with images, people and situations (Fennell 2012, 2015, Weston 2018) — what I call 'affective proofs'.

'Doctors for Clean Air': affective proof

The health conference: 'pink lungs' and 'black phlegm'

A few weeks after Ramya and I had visited Seppakkam with the health reports, we stood in the conference room of a hotel in Chennai, mingling with doctors, activists and journalists, who had all gathered for the inauguration of the 'Doctors for Clean Air' (DOCA) campaign, founded by a Delhi-based surgeon who aimed at influencing public policy makers into engaging with rising air pollution levels across the country. Ramya and her team had collaborated with the DOCA campaigners to receive support for their own initiatives, including their work in Ennore. Thus, while the inauguration event was organized as a collaborative conference where doctors, activists and a few Chennai-based residents discussed health statistics, legal cases and different campaign strategies, Ramya had ensured that the event at the hotel culminated with the release of the Seppakkam health report, and that it was thereafter followed with an in-person visit to the village.[40]

The conference began with a speech from the surgeon an DOCA founder, Dr. Rai. Having worked with numerous patients diagnosed with lung impairments, he said he was deeply disturbed by the increasing number of young people who were coming to the hospital he worked at for treatment. Then, projecting a medical image of a patient's lung on a plastic screen, Dr. Rai described the tint of pink that stood out in the image as indicative of a healthy lung. Contrasting the image, immediately, with another — an image where thick shades of black stood out over the pinks of the lung — the surgeon insisted that the change in colour was indicative of a rapid decline in the patient's respiratory health.

[40] Having known this was how the event was to end, Devi and Satya had confirmed with Ramya that they would meet the conference participants when they visited the village, thereby skipping a long and arduous journey into the city earlier in the day.

"The patient was a smoker. But the rate of deterioration was not commensurate to his smoking", Dr. Rai said. "He was still young. It turned black so fast because of the air he breathed every day."

The surgeon then went on to show statistics he had compiled through his work, to confirm that there were many cases in Delhi where young men and women showed signs of deteriorated lung function that was not equitable to their age profiles. He referenced this with a few other figures that showed that Delhi's air quality index frequently measured a disastrous excess of particulate matter.

"The only way to move forward is to declare this a public health emergency. The doctors amongst us have to be involved in policy making decisions. We need to declare a war on air pollution and tackle the polluting demons that are getting away with this."

Having stirred the audience into an applause, a member of Ramya's team spoke after Dr. Rai. A young health activist who had worked in Ennore for many years, she spoke of the research her team and herself had conducted in Ennore, reminding everyone about the Seppakkam health report that was to be officially released at the end of the event. Then, drawing her voice into a solemn tone, she emphasized that if they mapped all of the upcoming thermal power plant projects that were either at the proposal stage or working its ways through the bureaucracy, Tamil Nadu's coastline would see a power plant every 40 kilometers.

"Remember", she said. "The Tamil Nadu coastline is the second longest in India."

Her talk evolved into a larger discussion about the means by which doctors, residents and activists needed to motion the state into sharing the sense of urgency that their research work advanced upon them. While a former health department official argued that it was the "corrupt ways of the state" that had to change, insisting that the legislative frameworks in place to safeguard residents from pollution were already well developed and should simply be enforced, Dr. Rai intervened to suggest that the campaign's efforts must not exclude a focus on "public awareness". He added:

"Everyone has to understand that there is a chance of death in every breath because of air pollution."

To which, another doctor, Dr. Jeeva, made a passionate plea in response.

"We have to fight", he said. "Everyone has to join together and fight for our rights."

Dr. Rai and Dr. Jeeva were adamant that 'air pollution' and resulting respiratory failings were a matter of a 'public health emergency', at least as far as India's national

boundaries extended. In a flourish of dramatic idioms — *there is a chance of death in every breath … everyone has to join together … we need to declare a war on air pollution* —, they spelt out a simple thought: air pollution was a condition shared by all, and lung failure was a risk "we" (India's citizens) all bore and should all struggle against. This illustrated, as Asher Ghertner (2020) writes from Delhi, how atmospheric pollution often evokes common causes and shared effects, transforming the registers by which categories like "rights" and "citizenship" may be evaluated by different publics and by the state. Air, unlike land or even certain water bodies, quite simply cannot be "segregated". Moreover, in India, as Ghertner writes, the judiciary, faced with increasing cases about air pollution, has similarly resorted to allocating the rights of the citizen "beyond the space of the individual body, or even discrete social groupings, and into a more atmospheric realm of biological abstractions and vital circulations" (2020: 136) — like, for example, lung function stats, cardiovascular health or even biological age.

Advancing such air pollution induced imaginations, Dr. Rai qualified recordings of poor air quality, by showing the participants images of healthy "pink" lungs turning black — building on the kinds of "biological abstractions" that translated as the rights of the citizen for the Indian judiciary. Moreover, in insisting that "public awareness" was key to overturning the national "public health emergency" that was caused by air pollution, Dr. Rai also used the image of a deteriorating lung to move different publics into petitioning the state by inciting affective responses. The image of the lung, in other words, accrued with many sentiments as the participants were told about the "polluting demons"; the poor air quality standards in Delhi; about the health report; the amount of coal fired thermal power plants the Tamil Nadu coastline could possible see in the future; even setting the tone for some to start a "fight".

Recent anthropological scholarship has gone on to show the extent to which governmental practices are rooted in the production of feelings, emotions and affective states in their subjects. For example, Ann Stoler (2004) writes about the work that colonial regimes, which she characterizes as "affective states", have devoted to cultivating "proper sentiments" among the native subjects they sought to administer. William Mazzarella (2013) exposes the ways in which film censorship in the Indian context does the government's work of enticing select passions in the citizens who consume cinematic productions. Kath Weston (2018) reminds us that the affective workings of governmental practices, in fact, figured in the writings of key figures of the 18th century Scottish Enlightenment, at a time when the "sympathetic" relation of the state to its subjects caused much discussion among writers such

as Adam Smith and David Hume (see also Fennell 2015: 21-22). Any sympathetic relation, however, might be best conceived as affecting recursively its different components, pointing to the question: how can subjects of "affective" states and governmental practices, in turn, entice "sympathy" from fellow subjects and their governments themselves? This is the question Catherine Fennell (2012) poses with regards to a citizen-led initiative to open a National Public Housing Museum, with the goal to elicit a range of sympathetic feelings and affects between its visitors and the past experiences of social housing residents.

This is also the question that seemed to loom in the room as the participants of the conference gathered their attention around the image of a sickly lung. The destroyed lung summoned by Dr Rai to raise "public awareness" about air pollution, I argue, became the material locus of mediation between state and subjects, and between political subjects themselves. By attempting to harness shared feelings and affects, it induced an "affective proof" as to the deteriorating quality of air across India and the government's current failure at tackling it.

Perhaps of more importance to illustrating this notion of "affective proof" was the moment when Raja, a young fisherman from Ennore who had collaborated on various projects with Ramya and her team, spoke to the participants at the conference. First, he pointed out that it was difficult for him to comprehend how it was that the same government that provided subsidies for liquid petroleum gas (LPG) connections — to deter people from engaging in unhealthy combustion practices — continued to combust coal in Ennore, and spew the kinds of toxic byproducts that emerged with such combustive practices. Then, narrating an incident from when he was a student at his local high school, Raja pointed out that while his peers and himself celebrated the days his teachers never showed up, knowing very well that it was their teacher's fragile health that often resulted in their absence, he expressed how troubling it was when he later understood that his teacher's ill-health was a direct result of them living by the power plants. As he eloquently claimed:

> Coal is everywhere in Ennore. It is normal for all of us to cough black phlegm because of this. Then we see clearly what is inside us. We see what our own government is doing to us…
>
> Water act, air act, everything they [TANGEDCO] are violating. Cases are there in court. I'm also a petitioner. But only when they are willing to see the way we are suffering, how some young children are struggling to breathe, maybe, then there can be some change. Otherwise, nothing will happen.

Raja's statement, I argue, was another attempt at introducing evidence about the toxicities that swarmed Ennore, a proof that would exceed the documentary formats of cases, petitions and reports. He wished to elicit similar kinds of sympathetic affective reactions that Dr. Rai called for in his presentation of the image of the charred lung to become the basis by which the government "saw" what was happening to the residents of his village. He told the participants that when he saw the images of the black lungs, he felt those lungs inside him. And, for Raja, only if the government could encounter and experience such "affective proof" of coal ash infesting bodies, air and land, was there a chance for things to change.

"Just like the politicians, that is how you have come"

Raja's speech, however, also undid the totalizing effects of Dr. Rai's suggestion that air pollution needed to be approached as a nationwide "public health emergency". His statements amplified what Ghertner also sharply points out: while constructs of "atmospheric citizenship" may stem from the notion that an improved atmosphere is favourable to all "who share breath" — as Dr Rai would claim —, the exclusionary potentialities of such rationales simmer in parallel. To paraphrase a similar point made by Catherine Fennell in her work on river contamination in Flint, Michigan, "we are *not* all Flint" (2016) and thus, in Raja's case, everyone was not Ennore[41].

Yet, Raja still found the image of the black lung extremely moving. He went on to tell the other participants at the conference, especially those who had never been to Ennore before, that the in person visit to the place he had lived all his life, which was to also culminate with a visit to Seppakkam, would hopefully validate what he had expressed in words. He longed, I argue, that the participants got to feel the distaste of the black phlegm he knew was inside him, thereby, amplifying the sense of urgency the conference sought to achieve. Ramya too, in a later conversation with me, insisted that the field visit was in fact chalked into the itinerary to "show" Seppakkam to the participants, especially, given the health report had just been released to the participants before. This showing of Seppakkam, I suggest, was also premised on the tactic of generating "affective proof", in other words, creating feelings, sentiments and emotions that attested to Seppakkam's existence alongside

[41] Here, I would wish to express the complexities of respiratory illness that the COVID 19 pandemic brought about in India and elsewhere, drastically revealing the inherent inequalities that underlay access to public health, or how bodily vulnerabilities mapped atop boundaries of class, race, caste, gender, neighborhood, etc.

the documentary format of the report. However, while the in-person visit was partially successful in generating the sentiment Ramya sought for it to, with many participants quick to express their upset with the sight of an ash pond surrounding the village on every edge, for a few residents of Seppakkam, the visit had other effects in parallel.

When the participants of the conference reached Seppakkam, after Ramya offered them a quick explanation about the history of the ash pond and the story of the new SEZ power plant, the participants met Devi and a few other women at the center of the village. Devi, first, thanked all of those who had come and then expressed her gratitude for the support they extended for the residents of Seppakkam. Some of the other women also shared Devi's sentiment, later telling Dr. Jeeva in particular, who had a range of questions about the residents' health conditions, about the many ailments their children suffered from.[42] But for one resident called Selvi, a young woman with a particularly sharp tongue, the entire visit arose in her a deep suspicion. In a moment of lasting silence, she abruptly snapped:

> "Just like you have come, they all came in cars and left. Kamal came. Then Kanimozhi. Only when they want something, then they know where Seppakkam is. But after that, our village somehow disappears."

Selvi was referring to two well-known political figures, Kamal Hasan — a movie star turned politician who had then just floated a new political party —, and Kanimozhi Karunanidhi — the daughter of former Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi and at that point an incumbent member of India's national parliament. They had both visited Seppakkam during the lead up to the national elections, she told the participants after, promising to relocate its residents as a part of their electoral campaign. Insisting that they echoed the residents' concerns about living by toxic ash, both Kamal and Kanimozhi, Selvi went on to claim, promised them expeditious action. However, nothing really came of their visits after the elections ended. Then, pointing to her body, Selvi remarked:

> "What to do? I'm slowly getting used to it withering away in this place. It is my ill fate. That is all."

For Selvi, the in-person visit stroked up other feelings that did not align with the doctors' and the participants'. While their visit, she claimed, was reminiscent of the ways different politicians had visited Seppakkam for electoral purposes, what it also reminded her

[42] Dr. Rai had left within minutes of having reached Seppakkam. His travel arrangements, I was later told, had cut his participation short.

of was that the politicians grandiose claims of doing something for Seppakkam often resulted in her having to still interact with the toxic ash that surrounded her village after they left. Her body, she insisted in a moment of sheer anguish, was "getting used to withering away" in Seppakkam and that was the "proof" she held on to. An in-person visit, she felt, could not change that.

While a few women broke into a nervous chuckle, Devi and few others told Selvi off and Selvi quickly disengaged, however, still standing amidst everyone else. Ramya insisted that the in-person visit was not aimed at promising anyone anything but was intended to get more people to stand behind the health report. But the moment where the conversation took a different turn altogether was when Dr. Jeeva, ponderous up until then, told Selvi:

> "We are not politicians. Don't worry. I know how they [politicians] work. I don't have any intention of acting like them."
>
> And, insisting that something had to be done, Dr. Jeeva added:
>
> "We will organize a Health Camp", looking at Ramya for approval.

The women expressed their satisfaction almost instantly with the doctor's offer and Ramya thanked Dr. Jeeva profusely. I knew from my time with other NGO workers across India that a "health camp" was a common practice, amounting to the temporary on-site set up of a medical facility for diagnosis and quick treatment of a range of basic ailments. A discussion ensued quickly, and the women suggested that setting up the Health Camp two weeks on would be beneficial for them, giving them sufficient time to ensure that they and members of their household could hold off any other commitments and be present.

Towards the end, as the participants and the women parted ways, I stood with Ramya and Dr. Jeeva by the entrance of the village, as most got back into the cars that they had arrived in. Ramya thanked Dr. Jeeva again and apologized for Selvi's statements, telling him that many of the women in the village in fact shared Selvi's sentiments. In turn, Dr. Jeeva told Ramya he had understood Selvi's feelings, and expressed his hope that the Health Camp would change the situation the residents of Seppakkam faced. They both agreed that the data that they would collect, from blood pressure readings to X-Ray prints, would present itself as added evidence for an amplified health report, ratifying that the need for relocating Seppakkam's residents was a matter of urgency. Or, at the very least, as Ramya interjected in between, even foster an acknowledgement from the government that there were people

actually living by the power plant's ash pond. Just before we left, Dr. Jeeva, in a spurt of vigour, added:

> "We will do something. We will show the results to TANGEDCO. We will relocate them. That is all."

•

The following section explores what happened after Dr. Jeeva's bold call to organize another, different kind of event at Seppakkam: what he called a "Health Camp". I describe the ways in which the Health Camp enacted yet another attempt, on the part of the activists and doctors, to create proof of Seppakkam's existence. They did this in several ways: through the production of updated, refined, official documentary reports (another round documentary proof); through the collection of a range of material evidence which, they hoped, might elicit in certain publics and in "the government" a sympathetic response to the plight of Seppakkam's residents (more affective proof); and finally, through taking their own part in a medical performance where they were no longer mere visitors of the village, but qualified professionals. This final attempt to garner evidence of Seppakkam's existence rested on the doctors' and activists' hopes to participate in the villagers' lives, thereby coming closer to sharing a certain intimacy with the ash ponds, the plants, and the consequences of living by them. This attempt to generate "proof by medical practice" delved deep into the specific context of Seppakkam, departing from the universalizing assumptions that India's citizens all shared the "public health emergency" of air pollution the same way.

Eventually, the goal Ramya and her team had stated from the start remained unchanged: to urge TANGEDCO and the Tamil Nadu government, through the accumulation of such a piling up of evidence, to relocate the village and its residents. But while those goals and the collection of proofs leading up to them were quite clear to the activists and doctors, I will show in the concluding paragraphs how they also collided uneasily with the desires, hopes and practical plans of some of Seppakkam's residents themselves.

The Health Camp: proof by medical practice

Two weeks after the conference, I accompanied Dr Jeeva, a doctor colleague of his, Ramya and Murugan (the activist we met in the introduction), to Seppakkam for the Health

Camp. When the five of us reached the central community hall, three lab technicians from the doctors' team had commenced setting up the mobile health van that was equipped with an X-Ray machine — to determine, in addition to general respiratory health, if there were undetected cases of Tuberculosis amongst Seppakkam's residents.

> "Tell me, will they distribute medicines today?", Selvi called out to me as soon as she saw us arrive.

I explained that the doctors intended to distribute medicines, but only non-prescriptive medicines like vitamin supplements and cough syrups, and Selvi seemed to find that satisfactory. The fact that the doctor's team were handing out "something", she said, referring to the medicines, was good enough. Selvi swiftly walked away to tell the other women about the medicines, as I began helping the doctors' team set up their desks.

The layout for the camp was simple and turned out to be quite efficient. Residents walked in from one entrance of a large run-down community hall, registering at the first desk that was manned by Ramya, moving to one of two desks with the doctors immediately after that. Assessments usually lasted for a few minutes, with the doctors (both general physicians) enquiring about existing health conditions, making observations and recording skin infections and aberrations in their notebooks, checking the blood pressure levels of a few older patients, while using their stethoscope to assess the respiratory conditions of everyone who visited. When there were suspected issues with the resident's respiratory health, they were instructed to get an X-Ray at the mobile health van parked a few yards further. At the end, an individual health report was compiled for the patient, and stacked up neatly on a table displayed to that effect.

Three hours down the line, about halfway through the camp's proceedings, as individual health reports had stacked up to a visible little pile on their table, Murugan announced to the residents that the proceedings of the health camp was aimed at prompting TANGEDCO into immediate action. The individual health reports were going to be worked into one large medical file about the village. This extended report, along with the existing health report, would then be submitted to the director of TANGEDCO in a personal meeting — a meeting the doctors and the activists were then attempting to set up. Then, with added emphasis, Murugan insisted that a handful of Seppakkam's residents also accompany the doctors to the meeting, to make demands for relocation in person. Murugan later explained to me:

> "If the director sees people in his office, then he will see that they want this. Those X-Rays, he will realize, are actually those people's bodies. It is important."

While Murugan's exhortation caused a murmur of assent among the people who heard it, it was becoming increasingly clear to me that this stated purpose — the compilation of a huge, heavily detailed health report, meant to urge TANGEDCO into relocating Seppakkam — was not the only thing that residents were after: in Devi's words, "something" else seemed to be at stake. Most people lining up at the Health Camp, indeed, had many questions to submit to the doctors about their pre-existing health conditions, the kind of question one poses during an individual, specialized medical consultation. For example, an older man in his eighties, went on requesting the doctors to examine his ankles and knees as he suffered from inflammatory swellings. While the doctors duly noted the skin infections that overwhelmed the man's hands and legs, gently telling him that he needed deeper orthopaedic examination for a more informed diagnosis about the swellings, even setting up a pro-bono appointment for him to meet them at their clinic on a later date, they only offered him an antiseptic ointment for his skin, to treat what they marked out as a result of continuous interaction with toxic fly ash. The older man, however, was not entirely satisfied. The swellings on his legs, he insisted, was what was urgent to him, not the skin rashes. But he only received reinforced assurances that his orthopaedic health would be examined at the doctor's clinic, once he went there.

Similarly, many of the women arrived with hosts of questions regarding the health problems that their children faced, bringing up cases of malaria, viral fever, and diarrhoea from their children's past. Many mothers voluntarily requested that their children get "xeroxed" (X-Ray) given that the facility was available for free. Here again, both doctors, though extremely receptive to the resident's questions, engaging patiently in discussion with the concerned mothers, still expressed the limitations of the health camp in offering any specialized diagnostic care. While the most urgent of cases were handed pro-bono appointments at their clinic, most were given preventive advice only, and recommendations to carry on with their already planned-for routinised health checkups.

In effect, I was getting the feeling that the residents all acted as if they should make the best of a free, at-home, unlimited opportunity for a full medical check-up from top-end physicians — an impression that was only echoed by the pressing tone in Devi's initial question: *"tell me, will they distribute medicines today?".*Another odd aspect that stared everyone in the eye, was that only the women, children and elders of the village were

attending the camp. When Murugan asked her why that was so, Devi, quick to respond, bluntly told him the men were "scared". Under Murugan's interlocked stare, she explained that while a few were away at work, those who were in the village, like her own husband, Satya, were worried that doctors would diagnose them with a severe illness, exposing their failing lungs in the sheer black and white evidence of an X-ray.

> "I told him he should come", Devi murmured, "But he's scared. Even I am. I also know what it means to live here. But I know the report is important."

An X-ray in Seppakkam held many "affordances", or possibilities to do more and differently from the purposes embedded in its design (Keane 2018). For the NGO and the doctors, an X-ray (chain)-produced at the Health Camp might participate in granting the village residents with the distant hope of a relocation. Another affordance contained in the plasticised "xeroxed" image, however, was that it could unlock fast, quality, urgent health treatment for the person whose body-part it portrayed. As Webb Keane puts it (2005), a sign or image should never be mistaken for "the garb of meaning", but rather considered as a material objects in its own right, affording its own material potencies. While an X-ray in Seppakkam might have counted as the sign (the proof) of the village and its resident's existence — it was also, simultaneously and quite simply, a medical report that testified of the specificities of a person's health status. Yet another affordance contained in an X-Ray — or in any other diagnosis procedure the Health Camp ran at Seppakkam —, was illustrated by Devi's explanation for Satya's absence: the potency to place a seal on one's future, labelling one as chronically sick or terminally ill.

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Thus far, in this chapter, I have detailed the various 'proofs' that Ramya and the residents of Seppakkam designed to confirm Seppakkam's 'existence' by the ash pond of the NCTPS. These 'proofs' I have also stated, were meant to act as evidence such that TANGEDCO first acknowledged and thereafter relocated the residents of Seppakkam.

I began this chapter by closely examining the SEZ power plant's Environmental Impact Assessment Reort (EIA), as to show how Seppakkam's absence from the report was a deliberate ploy by the government such that they could get an Environmental Clearance Certificate from the Ministry of Environment. In extension, I have suggested that government

documents like the EIA, while designed as exercises to promote bureaucratic 'transparency' and efficiency, in fact obscure and opacify governmental procedures at the same time.

In the second section, I begin laying out the different kinds of 'proof' that were collected and designed to show Seppakkam's existence. I speak about 'paper proof' by examining the health report that Ramya had produced. The health report, in other words, acted as documentary evidence of Seppakkam's proximity to the ash pond by presenting the health problems that many of the residents faced by having to live by toxic ash. The health report also states that the relocation of Seppakkam's residents was a matter of urgency, thereby presenting both 'proofs' and 'demands' in paper format.

With 'paper proof', Ramya also organized a health conference wherein the health report was to be officially released in front of leading doctors, activists and journalists. The health conference, I have argued, culminating with a field visit to Seppakkam, allowed for the fostering of "affective proof" — where feelings, emotions and senses were to strengthen the contents of the health report.

However, given that the field visit only reminded Selvi of the ways different politicians flocked Seppakkam during election season, with Selvi stating this aloud to the group, the awkwardness of the moment resulted in Dr. Jeeva offering to conduct a health camp. The resultant health camp, while becoming an event that looked to collect and present 'medical proof' of Seppakkam's existence, through specialized artifacts and medical readings like X-Rays and blood pressure readings, also acted as an event where some of Seppakkam's residents came to actually access free health care. While some were happy with the fact that they received medicines, with a few older residents upset with having not received more comprehensive medical attention, a few did not show up at all in fear of finding out what it was that living by the ash pond could have done to them.

In the last section to this chapter, I show while all of this 'proof' was designed to get TANGEDCO to relocate Seppakkam's residents, there were other outcomes that a few residents told me they would settle for.

"I can only protest if I have a contract", or why relocation is not all

As I later reflected on the Health Camp, I was reminded of an earlier discussion I had had with Satya. On the day we first came to distribute copies of the health report, Satya told

me that if all of the documentary evidence accumulated were to be successfully floated up to an attentive reader at TANGEDCO, the confirmation of Seppakkam's "existence" could maybe grant the men in the village better employment opportunities at the power plants.

"They act like we don't exist and use it to cheat us with work also", he claimed.

Satya went on to explain that all the residents could get in terms of employment in Ennore was daily wage-work (or 'coolie" work) at the new power plant's construction site. This work was sourced through a powerful sub-contractor, who, in turn paid the local Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA) to be continuously favoured when it came to TANGEDCO's handing out of small and mid-size labour contracts. The money that reached the MLA, Satya said, was siphoned from his wages and he had no say in the matter.

> "They all make deals like this", Satya added. "That is why there is so much construction activity… then they can make more money. Why do you think one more power plant is coming here?"

I was particularly caught by surprise by Satya's barbed comment when I asked him if he had joined the protests the unions had organized a few months prior:

> "I can only protest if I have a contract. How else can I go? Even to join the union, don't I need to show them I exist on paper?"

Satya's declarations echoed Akhil Gupta's (2012) writings about the ways in which governmental corruption, enacted through a politics of inscription, systematically furthered forms of inequality towards vulnerable populations. From TANGEDCO's refusal to hear and address the resident's concerns about living by toxic ash, to the non-issuance of work contracts when it came to the resident's employment as daily-wage workers at the new construction site, the government purposefully extended such acts of documentary obfuscation to support the operation of the power plants, thereby, furthering the kinds of illegal profiteering that came with its operations (See Chapter 3). Satya's statements also shed light on how the union's performative manifestation, when it came to challenging state-sponsored corruption, especially in relation to the treatment of contractual workers (See Chapter 4), excluded the participation of those who possessed no contract at all. In other words, the absence of his employment on paper, stemming from the government's non-recognition of Seppakkam in certain official documents, denied him the opportunity to access the benefits of trade-union membership.

But there was another implication contained in Satya's hope with what it was that the health report could eventually grant him. This hope diverged from Ramya's or Dr Jeeva's

own stated purposes: indeed, if TANGEDCO acknowledged the presence of Seppakkam in lieu of the report, Satya was content with the government company offering them permanent work positions at the power plant, which meant foregoing any plan for relocation.

> "If they give us jobs, that is also okay", he told me.
>
> "But what about living by all this ash? Is it not better that you live away from all of this toxic waste?", I asked.

Satya told me his still wished for the residents of Seppakkam to be relocated. They were all 'suffering' because of the ash pond. But he had a few doubts. Where would they be relocated to? What jobs would they get there?

> "If they give us permanent jobs, then I can slowly take my family out of here. It is better for us, I think. But I understand what Ramya is doing. First we need to show what is happening here. That is important. Then we can take the next step."

In many ways, Satya agreed that showing that Seppakkam existed to TANGEDCO was the first step. But in presenting all the 'proof' to TANGEDCO, Satya hoped the outcome would be different. If they were offered permanent positions, Satya insisted, he would not mind living in Seppakkam for some time to come.

> "Whatever is inside us", he told me speaking about a possible illness that was inside him because of the toxic ash, "it is already there. Am I not right?"

At that moment I simply nodded, not knowing how to respond to Satya's comment, somehow letting our conversation slip away. On later reflection, I wondered how I could make sense of Satya's own desire for a permanent job at TANGEDCO, thereby accepting a continued life lived intimately with toxic ash for his family and him. Perhaps the answer lies in Satya's own admission that 'more' power plants were going to come up in Ennore. In having a legitimate and 'permanent' position within the industry, his own future would be secure in ways that relocation did not necessarily grant him or his family. If a permanent job was in store, a life lived by the ash pond would not pose the same problems as reported in the health report, and the later medical report.

I have recounted the brief story of Satya to suggest that, while many residents agreed with Ramya's efforts to show that Seppakkam 'existed', a few hoped for outcomes that were different. Living away from toxic ash, in other words, was not the sole aim for some in Seppakkam. This, I argue, urges us to consider how lives lived intimately with the toxic, in itself offered some a future out of this landscape of coal.

Conclusion

For many months after the health camp, I frequently asked Ramya if they managed to set up a meet with TANGEDCO to submit all their evidence. In the first few weeks after the health camp, I saw her tirelessly compile all the data from the camp into a detailed medical report. During this time, TANGEDCO, she told me, were cooperating with the senior doctor from the conference but were yet to offer them an official meeting. This went on for many months and Ramya and her team tried many intermediary tactics, much like Sundaram in Part 2, to push TANGEDCO into a meeting. Frequent letters to the director, news reports, videos on YouTube, all in an effort to make Seppakkam more perceptible to a wider public. Unfortunately, TANGEDCO still continued to stall on them.

In August 2020, the ageing ash pipes around Seppakkam burst, quickly flooding Seppakkam with toxic slurry, damaging the lives of its residents further. Ramya and her team were quick to voice their distress with the situation. They participated in a protest that was staged by the residents, put forward demands for relocation, which eventually even instigated the then opposition DMK leader Kanimozhi Karunanidhi to tweet about the pipe burst (see Figure 20). An online news portal reported the incident and even quoted Ramya about the tragedy that the residents of Seppakkam faced. Citing results from the camp, which showed that cases of ‘typhoid’ were high and respiratory health amongst Sepakkam’s residents very low, Ramya asked the health ‘community’ to come forward and declare the incident a “health emergency”.

Figure 20. DMK leader Kanimozhi Karunanidhi's tweet about the pipe burst.

During the pipe-burst incident I was back in Edinburgh, just coming out a long lockdown in the United Kingdom, working through an early draft of this chapter. I had not spoken to Ramya, Devi or Satya in a long time and had followed up on the story on a media platform. But the online story and the tweets that followed did offer me some clues as to what had happened after the compilation of the medical report. Seppakkam, up until then, still fell short of 'existing' for TANGEDCO. The 'proof' that was collected, designed and published simply wasn't enough.

Figure 21. Shipments of imported coal docked at the coal yard in the Thoothukudi port. All of this coal was shipped in from Indonesia and was to be utilised by TANGEDO in their Thoothukudi Power Plant.

Conclusion: Stories of Growth

On the 12th of November 2021, anxious murmurs turned into weighty groans as the deadline to reach a climate impact agreement at the Glasgow COP 26 came and went. Rumour made it across different media platforms that the holdup was due to coal-related matters. Eventually, Alok Sharma, the president of the summit, declared that an agreement had been reached but that the initial commitment to 'phase out coal' had instead been changed to a commitment to 'phase down' coal. The reason for the last-minute change, many negotiators claimed, was India and China's steadfast opposition to the initial phrasing. A teary-eyed Sharma, with a lump in his voice, spoke to the media:

> "I apologise for the way this process has unfolded and I'm deeply sorry. I also understand the deep disappointment. But I think as you have noted, it is also vital that we protect this package" (Harvey 2021)

The outcry from other nation states, NGOs and environmental activists was substantial. India and China were criticized for watering down a deal that was essential to safeguarding a climate fit for human life. World leaders voiced their disappointment with the demands made by India and China. Perhaps, the most telling statement was made by Bill Hare, a climate scientist who spoke to the Associated Press after an agreement had been signed.

> "India's last-minute change to the language to phase down but not phase out coal is quite shocking… India has long been a blocker on climate action, but I have never seen it done so publicly." (The Hindu 2021)

Hare's suggestion that it was the first time that he 'saw' India, a long-time furtive 'blocker' of climate action, make its stance about coal 'public' on the global stage, rang a chord with my own research work. As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, the puzzle that triggered my focus on coal in India was the following: *while the Indian government consistently advertised its aim of moving away from fossil-fuel based energy, it simultaneously sanctioned the introduction of more coal-fired thermal power plants in the country.* How did such a contradiction play out, I wondered, in the places, lives and livelihoods where coal found ongoing presence?

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In this thesis, I provided accounts of lives and livelihoods that unfolded in places which were bound to see increased investments in coal and in coal-fired thermal power plants. How

did people live in the intimate embrace of coal's ongoing presence, I asked? What did it mean to live in a landscape that was fractured by irreversible coal-based pollutions and governmental illegalities? How did people navigate the shifting, precarious labour markets that were generated by the economies tied to the circulation, combustion and storage of coal? What forms of politics developed at its interstices?

To address these questions, this thesis offered an ethnography of what I characterize as Ennore's landscape of coal: both a descriptor and an analytic, this 'landscape' is composed of the relations that bounded people, things and places with coal and with its infrastructures. It includes but also exceeds the geographical coordinates of Ennore, Kuppam, Seppakam, Chennai and even contemporary India. The ethnography of this landscape of coal probes the harms and possibilities of lives and livelihoods embedded in coal's ongoing presence, circulation and combustion – and many of my early questions took on different shape and form throughout as I moved through this landscape for over a year.

With the fishermen of Kuppam, at the start of this thesis, we learnt that the presence of coal-fired thermal power plants by their homes changed the properties of the estuary that was to sustain their livelihoods. The immense transformation of Ennore's socio-natural landscape triggered in them a 'feeling' of simultaneous fixity and flux (Chapter 1). In other words, by interacting with the range of chemical toxicities that swarmed Ennore, ranging from the fly ash that was trapped in the air, to the bottom ash that flooded their river, they claimed that the operation of the power plants severely transformed their ability to fish in the river, leaving them stuck in a place that was undergoing tremendous transformation. The fishermen's stories were crucial in understanding how this landscape of coal played out on the scale of the body, pushing some to live and make sense of the range of toxicities that came attached with the construction and operation of the power plants, producing in them an array of troubling 'feelings'.

The fishermen's plight, simultaneously, also shed light on the transformed labour relations that unfolded in Ennore (Chapter 2). As much as they had to contend with the bodily embrace of coal's toxicities every time they practiced their *thozil*, they simultaneously had to negotiate and mediate the variegated unfolding of industrial capital that pierced through their landscape in parallel. In keeping with the scale of the fishermen's body, I show that the sensorial, cognitive and affective registers that recorded and decoded the toxicities that swarmed Ennore played out in tandem with the physical and abstract qualities of the embodied labour that equally made up their *thozil*. In other words, while the fishermen (and

the fishers of Kuppam) had to contend with skin aberrations, respiratory infections and a substantial increase in medical expenditure, they were also dealing with the industrial transformations that pulled them out of the water and into other relationships of labour – diluting their ability to be fishermen in their homes.

In Part 2 of this thesis, I move through Ennore's landscape of coal with Sundaram – a charismatic CITU leader. In Chapter 3, Sundaram's experiences help us comprehend the sheer density of governmental illegalities that blanketed Ennore, especially surrounding the power plants' labour market and work relation. Sundaram's account also sheds some light on the ways in which Ennore's landscape of coal produced and demanded certain charismatic figures, who were adept at navigating and tactically countering the sheer range of 'governmental illegalities'.

In continuing with Sundaram in Chapter 4, we see how the illegalities that surrounded the landscape produced a 'politics of perceptibility' where different individuals and organisations mobilised to make certain aspects of the landscape perceptible to varying publics. As my own experience at a protest organized by Sundaram and other colleagues shows, the government's influence over Ennore's landscape of coal could quite quickly turn hostile towards dissenters, balefully linking with the broader political climate across India that has extrajudicially persecuted dissenting voices as 'anti-nationals'. Simultaneously, protests could work as political theatres where savvy tacticians like Sundaram displayed their expertise at mediating a shifting landscape of politics, aesthetics and labour relation.

In the sole chapter in Part 3, the site and scale of analysis moves away from Sundaram and the union but preserves a focus on the politics of perceptibility that developed out of this landscape of coal. The story of Seppakkam, and activist Ramya's conjoint efforts with residents and NGO workers to prove its 'existence' to TANGEDCO and the government, brings our attention back to the ways certain residents intimately and unjustly interacted with coal-based toxicities on a daily basis. It also shows us the extent to which the government compounded legal violations in a bid to introduce more coal-fired thermal power plants in Ennore. Seppakkam's absence from the power plants plans and legal documents came as no surprise to many. There task, then was to generate 'proof' that aimed at rendering the village perceptible within this landscape of coal in the hope of eliciting a sympathetic public – and, perhaps, change.

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In the conclusion to this thesis, I would like to consider how my ethnography of Ennore's landscape of coal echoes with the global cries and demands for the abandonment of fossil-fuel based energies. How did people who lived daily and intimately with coal, make sense of designs for futures where coal would 'on its way out' and planned for 'phasing down'? How do the stories I collected in Ennore speak to coal's contested presence and futures in India, and on the rest of the planet?

Take, for instance, how the founder of a private logistic firm who dealt with the transport of coal into Indian ports spoke of TANGEDCO's increasing coal imports: "I think you are forgetting", he said, "the city of Chennai *grew* because of coal. Coal won't go away just like that." Or consider how a TANGEDCO engineer snapped back at me when I asked him a similar question: "How do you think we will grow if we do not achieve 100 percent electrification?" And ponder on what Selvi said, when I asked her what she thought about the addition of the SEZ power plant in Ennore: "I see it every day. It is becoming bigger. When I see it, I can tell you, inside me an anger grows [*valarithu*]"[43].

All of these responses were recorded more than two years before the conclusion of the COP 26 summit. Yet the 'growth' they all spoke of rings uncomfortably at odds with narratives and plans for 'phasing down' (let alone 'phasing out') coal. To my questions about the future of coal in Ennore, and the future of coal in India more generally, various projections, accusations and desires for 'growth', were everywhere.

In lieu of a conclusion, the following five stories dig up snippets of those narratives of 'growth', in the hope that they might help us understand what the 'phasing down' of coal means for those currently living in intimate embrace of coal.

Demand will grow, we hope

In February 2018, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) issued an order for public and private sector banks to resolve bad loans from all stressed and non-performing assets. A list of 34 non-performing and stranded coal-fired thermal power plants (and power plant projects)

[43] Selvi had used the Tamil word *valarithu* which translates in English to 'grow'.

were called out in the order[44]. Immediately, the defaulters filed various petitions, causing quite the stir in the mainstream media. Eventually, after a year of petitions and counter petitions in different courts, the Supreme Court of India quashed the RBI order on the grounds that it was 'unconstitutional'. While the RBI retracted the order in line with court's decision, this, however, did not mean that the power plants had gotten away with the threat of insolvency.

Sitting with the human-resource manager, in the administrative office of a private thermal power plant in southern Tamil Nadu — a power plant that had been called out in the RBI circular — I was to meet the head of operations for an interview I had managed to arrange after sustained efforts. After an hour's wait, I was introduced to Mr. Nasir, a man with a remarkably kind face. His eyes fixed on the screen of his computer, Mr. Nasir asked me to take a seat as I walked into his office, apologizing that he still had a few more minutes' worth of work, before launching ferociously at his keypad. Eventually, Mr. Nasir took his eyes of the screen, telling me that there was "a lot going on at the moment" given the RBI circular, insisting that he was ready for any question I had. After a brief exchange of pleasantries, I dug straight into queries about the future of his power plant, given what was generally being said about the gradual disinvestments in coal, and more specifically, about the threat of insolvency his power plant faced. Mr. Nasir sniggered and pulled his glasses back up to his forehead, rubbing his eyes intently. He then broke into a long monologue.

> "Back in 2006 there was a boom", he said, "…there was significant *growth* in demand and the laws had made it easy for private investment."

Various different enterprises, he told me, those in the energy sector and those in other businesses, made plans to capitalize on this 'boom' and the Tamil Nadu government equally welcomed such investments. Coal-fired thermal power plants were the infrastructure of choice for a multiple of factors ranging from easy access to domestic and imported coal to the growing expertise in power plant management and constructions services. But the problem with building and running coal-fired thermal power plants was that it was highly capital intensive in its nascent stages and often took a really long period of time before it became a profitable venture. A saturation of such infrastructures in the market, he said, was always going to be very risky.

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[44] Jointly holding nearly 40 gigawatts in generation capacity and carrying anywhere between US$ 40 to 60 billion (Buckley et al. 2019) in bad assets

> "But people didn't think about this at the time… they thought demand will continue *growing* and that was it. It didn't *grow* as expected and that is why we are in this situation at the moment."

Then, I asked Mr. Nasir: was coal really being 'phased out' as certain leaders publicly projected? And what about TANGEDCO and the government's continued investments in coal-fired thermal power plants? Despite all of the installed capacity that was already in place, how did he make sense of TANGEDCOs push for more coal?

Mr. Nasir asserted that TANGEDCO, like many other state-run electricity companies, were complicated to work with and even harder to 'understand'. Coal was slowly being phased out, according to him, but the process was not going to be 'fast' or 'simple' as people tended to believe. But as per why TANGEDCO were investing in more coal-fired thermal power plants, Mr. Nasir insisted that the new plants were meant to replace older plants in a few years and, sniggered, as he suggested that "there was a lot of money that leaked in the construction phases."

> "TANGEDCO's debt can keep *growing* and they won't suffer... We are the ones who will fall in this business...But we have hope... The infrastructure is there, the coal is readily available, the demand just hasn't reached our projections. But it will *grow*. The demand, we hope, will *grow* soon."

There is no place to grow here

"There is no place for me to *grow* here."

When Mohammed told me this, I was slightly taken aback. Was he not a permanent employee, a *company karaan*, I remembered asking myself? As we sat in the control room of Mr. Nasir's power plant, he pointed at the large monitor that was installed in the centre of the room, with the specificities of both units of the power plant mapped out on either side, making a comment about how 'boring' it was stare at the blank parameter readings on a screen. "I can't look at that for too long", he said.

Mohammed had picked up a job with the private power plant through a recruitment drive at his engineering college. After a successful interview, he was handed a permanent contract, assigned the role of 'Assistant Engineer' (AE) and was given a fairly competitive starting salary. At that time, he was convinced it was the right move: electricity, he was frequently told, and as he also imagined, would always be in 'demand'. Five years later, however, he was still on the same pay grade and assigned to the same post.

> "I've been here five years… by now I should be a senior manager but I'm still an AE... I'm telling you, there is no place to *grow* here."

It wasn't only because the plant failed to run at full capacity, or that projected demand did not match the actual demand but more that he couldn't grow on the inside as an employee: he also knew very well that TANGEDCO owed the private plant INR 700 crores (US$ 90 million) and understood how that had crippled the financial health of the company[45]

> "The same job I'm doing here... in the government you get four to five times the salary. Plus, you get extra allowance and even government living quarters".

Though he could be assured of the 'growth' he sought as a government employee, knowing very well that both central government and TANGEDCO operated coal-fired thermal power plants would still be in demand despite the supposed disinvestment in coal, he also knew that the competition to access those jobs was extremely high. He had applied for a government post a few months before I met him and told me had to compete with 800 other applicants.

> "I didn't pay any money to get the posting. I had no contacts. Then itself I knew I wouldn't get the job."

To fashion the kind of personal growth he desired, Mohammed even looked for other jobs but found nothing suitable. He was a permanent employee at the power plant and was only finding contract jobs elsewhere.

> "Even the Middle East has only contract jobs and very low pay… there also there is nothing anymore."

But he was still looking, he told me, hoping to break away from the boredom, idleness and stagnation that came with his employment at the private power plant. To grow, he insisted, allowed him to access a future he always envisioned: a family, a house, a vehicle. He was confident coal would still be in demand, telling me that transmission networks across India were heavily designed to favour coal fired thermal power plants.

> "Tomorrow, you think they can say no more coal. Lot of change has to be done before. Everything has to change."

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[45] The only reason one of their units operated was because the company had a power purchase agreement in place with TANGEDCO. The problem, however, was that TANGEDCO had not paid them for many months. Recollecting those dues, while playing out in court, many within the private power plant knew was not going to be an easy process.

Towards the end of our meeting, Mohammed thanked me for spending the afternoon with him. His supervisor would have given him something menial to do and he was happy he whiled away a few hours doing something 'useful' – knowing that the cricket match would be on soon after I left.

Their arrogance is growing

When I asked Sundaram if there was any progress with BHEL one afternoon, as we met for a brief catch up at the CITU city office, he told me the company management were making his life 'difficult'. They were refusing to negotiate with him and the workers in private. They were even avoiding interactions at the labour Commissionerate office and Sundaram told me he was preparing a lawsuit with CITU lawyers. At one point, he added:

> "So many power plants are coming up in Ennore. The money they are making is in the crores. With that money, I've been seeing for some time now, the government's arrogance is also *growing*. Increasingly, they are showing just how little they care about the workers who are building everything for them.

Their stomachs will grow

"Coal means corruption, which means more money for the politicians."

Jagdish, the convenor of an anti-corruption organisation that had exposed a massive TANGEDCO-related coal scam during the time of my fieldwork, had said that when I interviewed him. Wanting to know more about the scam, he explained that his team had built their investigation after reading how several Indian energy firms had been 'over invoicing' and inflating the prices of imported Indonesian coal by forging coal quality certificates. TANGEDCO, he knew, were significantly dealing with Indonesian coal at the time the report was published, and given the company's penchant for financial corruption, he quickly filed an RTI (Right to Information) request. Over many months, through a detailed study of two years of purchase records, Jagdish and his team calculated financial irregularities amounting to nearly INR 6000 crores (US $ 8 Billion).

> "Everything is clear, it is on paper, the evidence stares at you. I can tell you, even the electricity minister for that period, his assets *grew* manyfold. Out of nowhere, suddenly, he's found the money to build a cricket stadium in his hometown."

Jagdish published the evidence he had against TANGEDCO on his organisation's website. He filed a complaint at the office of Director of Vigilance and Anti-Corruption (DVAC) and when they didn't respond to his complaint, his team and him had organised a press meet where they made their accusations public. But they had to be careful, he insisted, claiming that there were powerful private firms holding considerable influence over India's coal trade.

> "Coal is going to be in fashion for a while", Jagdish sighed gloomily. "It lines so many people's pockets. We know that is why our central government, when they are saying there will be no more coal tomorrow, are going and buying a lot of coal today...*Growth, growth, growth*, they'll say. But if we see properly, only their assets and their stomachs are *growing*. That is what coal means in this country."

Nothing will grow here

Ambu, a fisherman from Kuppam, had pulled me aside one afternoon in Ennore and told me that he was doing me a favour by keeping his story quick, and went on to place his hand on his chest : "There are too many things inside me". We stood by the banks of the river, on a muggy weekday afternoon, feeling the occasional comfort of a slight sea breeze as I said I had enough time to hear all he wanted to tell me. He laughed and told me I was lying.

"People's *asa*i [desires] cause a lot of trouble, and that's the problem", Ambu stated.

I asked him if he could tell me more by what he meant and Ambu pointed to the power plants and told me that it was people's 'desires', merging comfortably their 'greed' (*perasai* in Tamil), that allowed so many power plants to come up in Ennore. At one point, he had believed his own desires for an improved life could be fulfilled, that he would be given a job at TANGEDCO. But that never happened. Casting a sweeping look at what the power plants had done to his landscape, he told me that he had now learnt to manage his desires better. "In our world, some will benefit, and some will not", and that is what he told me he had learnt.

"But at first there was only one power plant and now, you can see, there are seven!"

Ambu had counted the new plants together with their extensions. He told me it was the politicians greedy desires that the people of Ennore fell victim to. But the politicians were benefitting, 'sitting comfortably in their airconditioned houses', 'feeding comfortably on good food', not showing any concern for the fishers in Ennore who were breathing the 'filthy air', fishing in the 'filthy water'.

"But do you not have any desires at all?", I asked.

Ambu looked mildly perturbed by my question. He was not convinced I had gotten what he said.

> "Look around you… what do you think can actually *grow* here now? Nothing. Nothing at all. And they are saying more power plants are coming."

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> I am not proposing a return to the Stone Age. My intent is not reactionary, nor even conservative, but simply subversive. It seems that the utopian imagination is trapped, like capitalism and industrialism and the human population, in a one-way future consisting only of growth. All I'm trying to do is figure out how to put a pig on the tracks.
>
> —*Ursula K. Le Guin*[46]

Nothing could *grow* in Ennore, Ambu claimed. His desires for a better life were stunted with the power plants having taken over his landscape. And there were more coming, he told me in a defeated tone, knowing that he would surely not benefit from them operating in his home. Additionally, with new power plants, Sundaram was confident that the government's arrogance towards precarious workers would only *grow*, insisting that he would have to step up his efforts to protect them from the onset of more companies. As he said, firmly: "We have to be ready."

But more coal in Ennore also mingled with other desires and hopes that were different from the claims Sundaram and Ambu made. For Mr. Nasir, more coal-fired thermal power plants instilled in him a sliver of hope that the demand for electricity would *grow* soon, matching projections that would in fact get his own plant to run at full capacity. For Mohammed, it signalled an opportunity at finding a permanent job at a public workplace, setting up the kinds of personal and professional *growth* he deeply desired. But Mohammed also knew he would need to have the 'right' contacts, and perhaps even the 'right' amount of

[46] The epigraph from is from Ursula le Guin's collection of essays, *Dancing at the edge of the world,* and it is another leaf taken from Tsing's book of inspiring insights and ideas, *The Mushroom at the End of the World, On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (2015:17).

money, as the push for more coal, as Jagdish insisted, *grew* the stomachs and assets of those corrupt politicians who were well plugged in with the practices of illegalities that surrounded the construction and operation of the power plants.

These were some of the hopes, desires and anxieties about 'growth', that were attached to a place that was about to see nearly 2500 extra megawatts of coal-fired thermal power added to the 3000 megawatts that were already generated on the peninsula. As Anna Tsing writes, "there is a rift between what experts tell us about economic growth, on the one hand, and stories about life and livelihood, on the other. This is not helpful. It is time to reimbue our understanding of the economy with arts of noticing" (2015:132). The stories of growth I offer here are a tentative contribution to the arts of noticing how people lived in the visceral and intimate embrace of coal, how they saw the future of this landscape and their lives in it.

Throughout this thesis, I have attempted to bring similar voices to the fore, to give them notice. Yet, there are many questions that remain unanswered and many ways in which this thesis remains limited in its analyses and in the stories it tells. For one, while it describes how this landscape of coal acts unevenly on different bodies, it rarely brings the voices of women and children to the fore. It also does not actively discuss the politics of caste and gender in its chapters, and would benefit from a deeper engagement with anthropological debates around climate change. I believe these are research and analytical avenues that this project must move towards.

The 'phasing down' of coal in India needs to be studied more closely. It needs more anthropology and it needs a wider chorus of contrasting voices to come to the fore. If this thesis is even mildly convincing in this regard, it would perhaps have done its job.

Epilogue. We have to go quite far.

In April 2021, as India was reeling from the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, I was in Chennai, with my parents, gearing up for what was going to be my third lockdown experience.

I had managed to get to Chennai at the start of 2021, just as India's national borders temporarily reopened to people returning from abroad, after having already spent two lockdowns, in the United Kingdom and in France. I flew back primarily to be with my parents, hoping we could spend a relaxed month together, especially after what had been a turbulent year spent across borders. Nestled with my return, was also the hope of conducting some more fieldwork, or at least check in with the people I had met during my research in Ennore.

But for the first two months of me having got to Chennai, I did not have it in me to contact any of my interlocutors. My parents and I had decided to limit social interactions to be as safe as possible, given the creeping news of rising cases – but a phone call was not out of the question. Yet, I simply could not get down to calling anyone, be it Velu, Sundaram or Ramya. I think that there were different reasons for me not being able to so. I didn't know what the circumstances of conducting fieldwork in the middle of a pandemic meant, and was not eager to test them out. I was scared of confronting the vastly different experiences that underlaid living through the pandemic, and did not want to learn that it had been fatally different for someone I had known.

But in April 2021, just as my mother and I were out shopping for essentials as the plans for a new lockdown had just been announced, my phone rang loudly in my pocket. I pulled it out and glanced at it quickly, rushing out of the shop to answer it when I saw it was Velu.

"Velu *anna* [older brother]! How are you?"

"Is it you? I thought you had disappeared. Where have you been?"

"I've been in the UK *anna.* I'm sorry. My number changes when I'm there. Has your family been okay?"

"Yes. Everyone is fine. So, when are you coming here?"

I told Velu that I didn't think I could come until the lockdown had been lifted. I also told him I had been in the city since the start of the year but could not explain to him why I had not called him yet.

> "You should have called. They are saying now that there is a big Adani port coming here. That is all, there'll be nothing here now."

I told Velu I knew about the port and was following the developments closely. I then asked him how Surya was, and he told me he was also doing okay. Surya was no longer at L&T he confirmed.

Then, Velu shifted topic. With a spark in his voice, he said:

> "I wanted to ask you something. Do you know other people who would like to come on the boat with us, like you did? For some *boating* [in English]? We can take them through the river, go to some spots and they can have a picnic. We are thinking of this business. Because, you know, right, our *thozil* is not supporting us anymore. It has been tough. Now, they are closing everything again, but when they open after *corona* is gone, we think people would come."

I told him I could not think of anyone at the moment but was willing to pass the word around. I agreed with him, that it had to wait till the lockdown ended.

And just I was about to ask Velu if he was ready for a few more months of lockdown, he interrupted me and said:

> "But we have to go far. To some nice spots. We know that not everyone would like to sit like you, and only see the power plants. We have to go quite far."

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