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HUMAN-GAUR RELATIONSHIPS IN KOTAGIRI



PREPARED AND PRESENTED BY
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ABSTRACT

This study explores the socio-cultural dimensions of Human-Gaur relationships in Kotagiri, the Nilgiris district, Tamil Nadu. Looking beyond the socio-economic and ecological aspects of human-gaur interactions, it illustrates the multifaceted nature of human-wildlife relationships.

A qualitative analysis of human-gaur interactions was done based on informal conversations, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions with various stakeholders in the Kotagiri taluk of the Nilgiris district, an area with rising human-wildlife interactions. The participants in the study are from diverse communities and come into contact with gaurs in different ways.

The study looked for the distinctive ways participants relate with gaurs, arising from culturally informed and experience-based knowledge systems. The study also focused on Doddu Aatam (Gaur Dance), a traditional performance by the Irular tribal community that shares stories of nature-culture relationships from one generation to the next.

The study explores the influence of mutual respect and fear on enabling shared spaces. Based on the narratives of the everyday interactions between humans and gaurs, the study puts forth that the people in the landscape relate to gaurs with an underlying belief that they are gentle and harmless beings and come near human settlements only for feeding.

INTRODUCTION

There is a very long history of harmony between nature and culture. People's relationship to nature in all societies is complex, diverse, multifaceted, and even contradictory, embracing many different perspectives on the world (Morris, 2020). The understanding of nature-culture relationships has changed, can, and will change again (Jones, 2006).

Human-wildlife coexistence is when humans live in harmony with wildlife in a world controlled by humans. Interactions between humans and wildlife are expected to increase globally as climate changes, suitable wildlife habitats shrink, and wild populations recover (IUCN, 2022). Having a better knowledge of the capacity to tolerate wildlife will help promote coexistence between humans and wildlife with minimal consequences for each other.

Human responses to wildlife differ across individuals and communities, species, cultures, and time. Greater coverage of geographies and cultural contexts would help improve the understanding of this important subject (Bhatia et al., 2019). With appropriate tools and management, public policies, and societal support, humans and wildlife can coexist in human-dominated landscapes (Nyhus, 2016).

An instance of human-wildlife coexistence is the relationship of the Idu Mishmi community with tigers in Arunachal Pradesh. People of the Idu Mishmi community claim tigers to be their brothers. The traditional story of the Idu Mishmi community tells that tigers and humans were born to the same mother and were siblings. Thus, killing a tiger is viewed as a homicide by the community. Through Idu Mishmi community claims on local wildlife, their indigenous taboos relating to wildlife conservation are framed as a sort of 'cultural capital' (Aiyadurai, 2016).



Gaur (*Bos gaurus*) | Credit: Opensource/Canva

Gaurs (*Bos gaurus*) are listed as vulnerable on the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List since 1986 and is a Schedule I species as per the Wildlife Protection Act (1972). Gaurs belong to the wild oxen family. Considered the largest living bovine, the body length of a gaur is usually 250–360 cm, with a height of 170–220 cm. Males weigh between 1000 and 1500 kg, and females between 700 and 1000 kg, making them the second heaviest oxen. Globally, gaurs are distributed in Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, China, India, Peninsular Malaysia, Burma, Nepal, Thailand, and Vietnam. In India, gaur is found in the central, southern, southwestern, and northeastern regions (CHOUDHURY, 2002). Gaurs are present in the tiger reserves of the state of Tamil Nadu, as well as the hills of Kodaikanal, Valparai, and the Nilgiris.

Gaurs feed on grasses, herbs, shrubs, and trees, and the composition of their diet may also vary according to seasons and food availability (Gad & Shyama, 2009). The feeding activity of gaurs peaks in the morning and late evening periods. Among gaurs, licking each other is a social gesture.

Gaurs are naturally timid and avoid human-use areas (Mohanarangan, 2010). However, in Kotagiri and Coonoor and different parts of the Nilgiris district of Tamil Nadu, gaurs have started to move out of the forests. In Kotagiri, gaurs have become so habituated to human presence that they even walk into towns and markets. Forest fragmentation is said to push the naturally shy gaurs to remain close to humans (Menon, 2020). There are records of gaurs in urban areas as early as 1922, but only in recent years have gaurs started to live in human-dominated landscapes routinely.



A gaur standing in the middle of a street in Kotagiri | Credit: Pavithran M M

In Kotagiri, a town rather than a forest village, people see gaur herds about five days per week (Prasath G & Micka-Maloy, 2018). It is thought that gaurs have started to move into human-dominated landscapes since their natural habitat is being destroyed, so barring them from towns and cities could leave them more vulnerable (Prasath G & Micka-Maloy, 2018). This exploratory study aims to document the socio-cultural dimensions of Human-Gaur relationships in Kotagiri. The experience of the PI, participant observations, informal conversations, and semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data.

STUDY SITE



Figure 1 -The Nilgiris district, Tamil Nadu | Credit: Badaga.co

The study was conducted in Kotagiri taluk of the Nilgiris District, Tamil Nadu, India. The Nilgiris district falls within the Nilgiris Biosphere Reserve, the first biosphere reserve in the country, with an area of 5,520 square kilometres. The landscape is home to endemic and endangered fauna - the Lion-tailed Macaque, Bengal Tiger, King Cobra, Indian Elephant, and Gaur. The Nilgiris district comprises six taluks: Ooty, Coonoor, Kundah, Kotagiri, Pandalur and Gudalur (Figure 1). These taluks are further divided into four panchayat unions: Kotagiri, Gudalur, Ooty, and Coonoor.

The area was long occupied by the indigenous tribal people of the Todar (pastorals); Kotar (artisans), Kurumbar, Irular, Kattu Nayakkar, and Paniyar (forest dwellers); and Badagar (agriculturalists). The Badagar were indigenous to the district but are not a tribal group. It is also home to early planters who arrived in the 1900s, Sri Lankan Tamil repatriates who arrived in the 1980s, and Malayalis who arrived in the 1940s.

The Sri Lankan repatriates work as wage labourers and small-scale cash crop farmers. The Malayalis are agriculturalists, mainly growing cash crops, with the educated younger generation moving to urban centres (Thekaekara et al., 2021).

Kotagiri is one of six taluks in the Nilgiris district. According to Census India 2011, 52,543 men and 55,747 women live in Kotagiri Taluk, which has a population of 1,08,290. Out of the total population, 50% live in urban areas and 60% live in rural areas. There are two towns and 14 villages in the Kotagiri taluk.

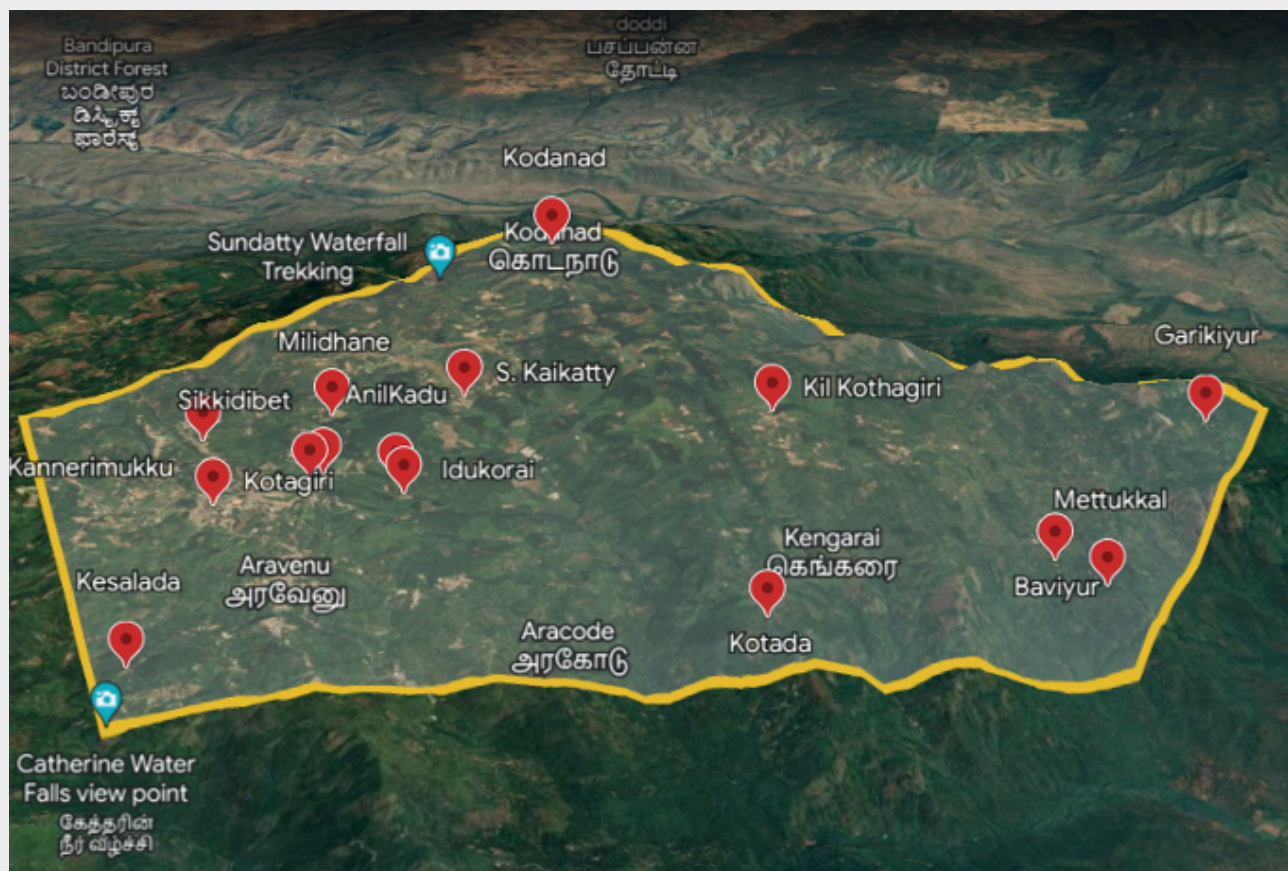


Figure 2 - Spatial classification of the study villages | Credit: Google Earth

Animals like bears, leopards, porcupines, wild dogs, and jungle cats are increasingly seen in residential areas in Kotagiri (Arathi Menon, 2023). In Kotagiri, gaurs come out of forests in herds and, in many cases, graze, mate, and sleep in the vast tea plantations. They are so habituated to human presence that they even walk into towns and markets.

It is very common for people to see gaurs grazing in residential neighbourhoods and tea plantations. A recent survey of the gaur population by the Tamil Nadu Forest Department in the Nilgiris division has put the population at 2000. Kotagiri was chosen as the study area as people have interacted significantly more with gaurs recently.

For this study, the data has been collected through participant observations, informal conversations, focus group discussions, and semi-structured interviews from different villages in Kotagiri Taluk, as shown in Figure 2.

CLASSIFICATION OF COMMUNITIES

COMMUNITY

CHARACTERISTICS

EARLY PLANTERS

Arrived in the 1900s. The early planters are the tea/coffee plantation owners and workers, with the younger generation mostly in other parts of the country or world

SRI LANKAN REPATRIATS

Arrived in the 1980s and worked as wage labourers and small-scale cash crop farmers. They are residing in colonies and line houses.

MALYALIS

Arrived in the 1940s. They are agriculturalists, though mostly growing cash crops, with the educated younger generation moving to urban centres. At present, most of the Malayalis are shopkeepers in the region.

BADAGAS

Indigenous to the hills but not tribes, Badagas arrived from Karnataka and settled in the Nilgiri hills more than centuries ago. They are agriculturalists.

KOTAS

Kotas fall under scheduled tribes. They are known for their craft of making pottery. They are agriculturalists. Currently, Kotas are in Government jobs and other notable jobs.

TODAS

They are pastoral communities residing on the top hill of the Nilgiri plateau. They are known for their Toda handicraft embroidery.

COMMUNITY

CHARACTERISTICS

IRULAS

The Irulas are scheduled tribes who live in reserve forests. They are known for being inspired musicians.

KURUMBAS

Alu Kurumba, a subgroup of the Kurumba tribes, resides inside the reserve forest, just like the Irula tribes. The Alu Kurumba tribe is well known for their paintings.

PEOPLE SETTLED FROM OTHER DISTRICTS

People from other parts of Tamil Nadu settled in the landscape for a living and mostly indulged in daily wage work.

METHODS & MATERIALS

The Principal Investigator (PI) spent four months at the field site between December 2022 and April 2023. The initial three months of fieldwork consisted of grounded theory methods such as unstructured, unrecorded conversations and observations, which helped as the foundation for more intensive follow-up. In the meantime, ethics approval was received from the Ethics Committee of the Wildlife Conservation Society-India (HR/2022/018). During the last month, between March and April 2023, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with stakeholders in different villages using a questionnaire.

The respondents were located using snowball sampling. An informal conversation with an elderly Toda tribesman revealed the relationship of the Irula tribe with gaurs. Informal conversations with Keystone Foundation (collaborative organisation) employees were the foundation for noticing the play Doddu Aatam (Gaur Dance) performed by the Irular community.

For the study, 20 semi-structured interviews and three focus group discussions were conducted. Participants were chosen as per their interests. Informed oral consent was obtained from all the participants before conducting the interviews. 11 interviews were conducted with people residing in colonies (Ambedkar Nagar, Sikkidibet, Idukorai, and Kesalada). Of these, seven were daily wage labourers, two were homemakers, one was a planter, and one was Head Master of Panchayat Union Primary School. Three interviews were conducted with the Kurumbar tribe community (Anilkadu and Baviyur): a daily wage labourer, a cultivator, and a cattle herder and small farmer. Five interviews were conducted with the Irular community people (Mettukkal and Kil Mettukkal): a homemaker, a shopkeeper, and three farmers. An interview was conducted with an old Kotar tribeswoman from Kil Kotagiri Kokal (village). Three focus group discussions were conducted: one in Kotada tea estate, which comprised six members; one in Milidhane (Badagar) village with seven members; and one in Mettukkal (Irular) village with four members.

Of the 20 semi-structured interviews with stakeholders from different communities, seven were female, and 13 were male. Of the three FGDs, the one conducted at the Kotada tea estate had two male and four female participants; the other two FGDs had male participants. The stories that came from individuals who were both male and female were similar.

The PI spent time understanding the history and culture of the landscape by attending different tribal festivals, interacting with staff at the Tribal Research Centre, and visiting museums and libraries. With the help of the Keystone Foundation staff, the PI got in contact with key informants in different villages. The PI was accompanied by the key informants for conducting interviews in most villages. In one village, the PI directly approached the head of the village and conducted the interview. The duration of the interviews varied between 20 and 70 minutes, depending on the respondents' interest in sharing information. Furthermore, when conducting individual interviews with respondents, the discussions occasionally turned into group discussions when curious relatives, neighbours, or passersby joined in.

The questionnaire included questions in three categories: seven questions on interactions and perspectives, three questions on relationships, and one on the background information of the respondent. For interviews with tribal communities residing in reserve forests, a distinct set of questions was created because of the differences between their interactions with gaurs and those of individuals from other communities.

The questions started out exploring the interactions and perspectives of people towards gaurs by asking how people became familiar with gaurs, whether the presence of gaurs has any negative or positive impact on their lifestyle, what makes them accept the presence of gaurs in human landscapes, and myths and stories about gaurs. To understand the relationship, the questions concerned how parents perceived gaurs, the different efforts people put into coexisting with gaurs, and whether people can lead a good life if there are no gaurs in human landscapes. Questions on Doddu Aatam were asked mainly with the Irular and Kurumbar tribal communities. In all the interviews that the PI had with the different communities, questions were also asked that were not on the list; many new questions emerged at the time of the interviews as per the flow of the conversation.

Audio recordings of all the interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed into English. The PI became familiar with the data by listening to the interview audio clips and repeatedly reading the transcriptions. As per reflective thinking, ideas and concepts often emerged as PI read through the field notes and transcriptions; the various themes for the story have been created. Once the themes had been identified, they were reviewed with the research team. Finally, it was named, and the stories were discovered.

RESULTS



Gaur | Credit: Opensource/Canva

SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHY OF KOTGAIRI AND GAURS - A GLANCE

Kotagiri is one of the six taluks in the Nilgiris district. According to Census India 2011, Kotagiri has a population of 1,08,290. Early planters, plantation workers, Sri Lankan repatriates and people settled from other parts of Tamil Nadu inhabit Kotagiri. Badagas, Kotas, Todas, Irulas, and Kurumbas are the different indigenous communities residing within the Kotagiri taluk.

January is a festival season for Badaga, Kota and Toda communities. Hethai Habba is the biggest festival of the Badaga community of the Nilgiri hills, where they pay homage to their goddess Hethai Amma. The Kotar community celebrate Ayyanur Ammanur, a week-long festival held annually. Todas celebrate the Modweth festival between mid-December and mid-January. Sri Lankan repatriates, people settled from other parts of Tamil Nadu, and Malayalis have their own temple festivals, which are celebrated in March and April.

Kotagiri has vast tea plantations and agricultural lands with interspersed fragmented forest patches. In Kotagiri, it is becoming more common to witness bears, leopards, porcupines, wild dogs, and jungle cats near the residential areas. Gaurs come out of forests in herds and, in many cases, graze, mate, and sleep in the vast tea plantations. They are so habituated to humans' presence that they even walk into towns and markets. It has become very common to see gaurs grazing in residential neighbourhoods and tea plantations.



Women work while gaurs graze in a tea plantation | Credit: Pavithran M M

Women pluck tea leaves in the same estate where the gaurs are feeding, sometimes even as close as 10–20 feet. However, they always maintain a safe distance from gaurs. When gaurs damage 150 - 200-year-old tea plants, the plantation owner views them as harmful. The Kurumba and Irula tribes people who engage primarily in farming activities interact with gaurs when they travel for work. At times, gaurs raid the croplands of Badaga, Toda, Irula and Kurumba communities, which makes them build fences around the field and secure the crops.

Three interviews were done with women workers on the plantation, who interact with gaurs when working in the estates. The FGD conducted in the Kotada tea estate, which falls under the Kotagiri taluk, also had four female participants who picked tea leaves. Among the four, two were migratory workers from northern India. It is becoming more common to see people from northern India working in the tea estates in Kotagiri and other taluks in the Nilgiri district.

Sri Lankan repatriates and people who migrated from other parts of Tamil Nadu call gaurs "*Kaatu Erumai*" or "*Kaatu Maadu*". The Irular community, in their language, calls them "*Doddu*". The Kota people call them "*Eema*", while the Badaga community call them "*Emme*". They are also referred to as "*Kaatu Pothu*" by the Malayalis and "*Kaati*" or "*Doddu*" by the Kurumba community.

GAURS: AS PER PEOPLE'S PERCEPTIONS

The respondents, who inhabit the urban and rural parts of Kotagiri, have become familiar with gaurs through knowledge sharing. For instance, a woman tea plucker knew of gaurs when she went to work with her mother during her youth. When her mother showed her a gaur grazing on a tea plantation and explained its characteristics, the respondent became familiar with it. The respondents from the Irula and Kurumba communities residing in the reserve forest areas became familiar with gaurs when going to work (honey collection, etc.) with their parents inside the forests.

When unexpectedly meeting a gaur, respondents from all communities will wait till it crosses their path. The respondents say maintaining a safe distance from gaurs helps in coexisting, which shows their awareness of the animal. One of the study's respondents, a cattle herder from the Kurumba community, knew the difference between the sound of a gaur and a cow. He had avoided conflict by recognising the sound.

The respondents from other parts of Kotagiri also differentiated between the sounds of a gaur and domestic cattle.

They feel gaurs sound closer to a tiger roaring. In recent years, the respondents have heard the sound of a gaur more often. Fear grips them every time they hear it. According to respondents, gaurs make the sound when they are furious or summon the female for

mating, while females make the sound during pregnancy. The sound of the gaur is said to be their language. All of the respondents feel that gaurs are huge, like elephants. The respondents think the presence of gaurs in the human-dominated landscape has more negative aspects than positive ones.

According to the respondents, the following are some of the drawbacks of gaurs' presence near human settlements:

- People could not grow vegetation near the houses as gaurs would come and raid them.
- When leaving for work, if gaurs are in people's way, reaching the workplace on time is impossible.
- Due to the fear that gaurs would be nearby, it is difficult to remain outside at night, even near the houses.

A major benefit of gaur presence in human-dominated landscapes is their faeces serving as manure for tea plants. The respondents in the rural and urban landscapes of Kotagiri accept the presence of gaurs in human-dominated landscapes as they see gaurs as gentle and harmless beings. They also say they have no choice but to live with it.

While conducting an FGD with the Irular community, they responded that gaurs are the merging point of people and the forest. When it comes to myth stories regarding gaurs, the respondents from indigenous communities and the recent inhabitants mentioned that when gaurs lick skin, the skin tears, and when the gaurs' breath touches the skin, an allergy will develop. They even explained that these myths are told to make people aware of maintaining distance from gaurs.

PEOPLE: HOW THEY CONNECT WITH GAURS

Most responders from Kotagiri's rural and urban areas have not heard stories about gaurs from their ancestors because gaurs were not around during their ancestors' time. People in the urban and rural landscapes have seen gaurs from 25 to 30 years ago. The respondents from Irula and Kurumba communities shared that their forefathers have asked them to go carefully for work inside the forest and be aware of gaurs. The respondents from the Toda and Kota communities agreed that their ancestors had a strong relationship with the buffaloes. Whenever there is a death in a Toda community, the Toda ancestors slaughter a buffalo and bury it with the corpse.

The respondents from Kotagiri's rural and urban areas feel that their lives would be better if there were no gaurs in human-dominated landscapes; as a result, they do not have to worry about going out at night, and they can raise plants as they wish.

According to the respondents, gaurs are essential to the ecology and must remain outside residential areas, in sholas. The respondents shared that they put little daily effort into coexisting with gaurs.

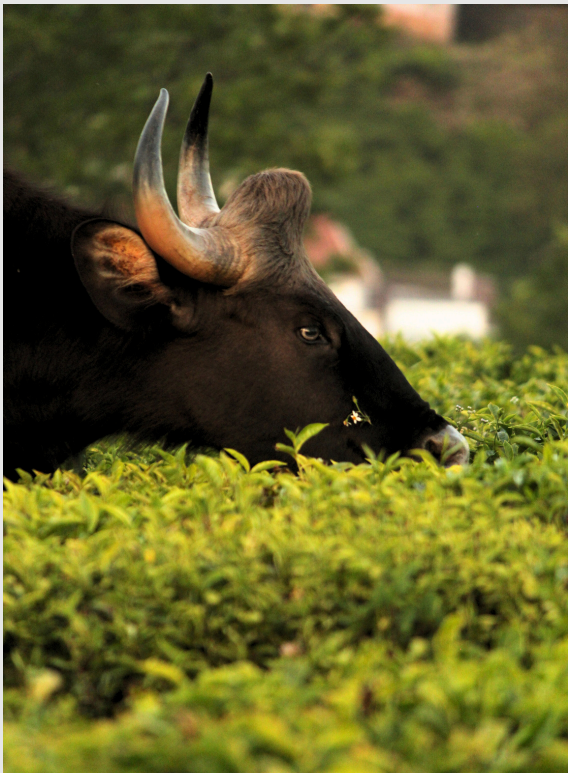
Some of the precautions they follow are:

- Using a torch whenever they step out at night.
- Old people avoid stepping out at night.
- Leaving home early to work.
- Waiting till the gaur crosses.
- Not disturbing it in any case.
- When the herd is in a particular place in an estate, leaving the area and plucking tea leaves elsewhere.

The respondents from the Irular community shared that gaurs are domestic cattle that were raised before. When people could not take care of it, they left it free. For food and water, the cattle roamed inside the forest, adopted forest behaviours, turned wild and became gaurs. According to the Irular and Kurumbar tribal communities and some of the respondents from the urban and rural areas of Kotagiri, gaurs are a crossbreed of domestic cattle and wild buffalo.

The Irular tribal community conducts a cultural performance called *Doddu Aatam* (Gaur Dance), which is believed to have been practised for many generations and performed to prevent misfortunes from befalling the community.

GAURS: IN PURSUIT OF FOOD



Gaur feeding in a tea estate
Credit: Pavithran M M

Gaurs feed primarily on grasses, shrubs and a variety of plants. In Kotagiri, while the gaurs are grazing in the tea estates, they eat only the grass amidst the tea plants, not the tea leaves themselves.

Furthermore, it is found that they visit human settlements in search of food. They mainly feed on the raised plants, weeds and grass near houses.

In addition to this, they also consume the crops and vegetables that are grown in the farmlands of the Badga, Toda, and Kota communities.

Gaurs are flexible and undergo behavioural change to coexist with people (Menon, 2020). Initially, it was seen that they did not have any food waste from the human settlements. However, it was later found that the gaurs in Kotagiri have gradually started to include cooked food waste, particularly vegetable waste, as a part of their diet.

DISCUSSION



An old male gaur walking on the main road amidst the vehicles in Kotagiri
Credit: Pavithran M M

Kotagiri is a small hill town on the Nilgiri plateau's North Eastern crest. Tea estates are vastly spread in the landscape. Apart from tea estates and factories, the landscape is occupied by agricultural lands and shola forests. The gaur is the only animal with access to every ecosystem component. The locals of Kotagiri witness gaurs daily as they casually graze and roam in the tea estates and inside the villages (residential zones). Some people in the landscape call them neighbours, and some even call them relatives.

It is impossible to say that there are no issues as humans and gaurs share spaces. In recent years, there have been negative consequences because of human-gaur interactions, even casualties. However, the figures are insignificant, and it is still unclear whether the situation will remain the same in the future with the fragmentation of grasslands and the urbanisation of the landscape.

DIFFERENT COMMUNITIES AND FORMS OF INTERACTION, ONE COMMON PERSPECTIVE

The study area is home to diverse communities, viz., early planters (tea plantation owners and workers), Sri Lankan repatriates, Malayalis, people settled from other parts of Tamil Nadu, and indigenous communities such as Badagas, Kotas, Todas, Irulas, and Kurumbas. Informal conversations were made with early planters, Sri Lankan repatriates, Malayalis, and people settled from other parts of Tamil Nadu. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with early planters, Sri Lankan repatriates, Kotas, Irulas, and Kurumbas. Focus group discussions were done with Badagas, Irulas and Plantation workers.

All the communities interact with gaurs in different ways. The early planters (plantation owners) were affected because gaurs sometimes damaged the 150–200-year-old tea plants. Gaurs feed in the same estate (sometimes approximately at a distance of 10 feet) where women are working plucking tea leaves. As most Sri Lankan repatriates work in estate-related occupations and other daily wage jobs, they interact with gaurs while working in estates, sometimes while going to work or returning from work, and mostly near their houses (inside villages).

When the field is poorly secured, gaurs sometimes come and raid the crops in the agricultural lands of the Badaga communities. Gaurs frequently enter Badagar Hattis (village) to feed or cross the path to get to a particular location. Similarly, while feeding, gaurs come to the agricultural fields of the Kotar and Todar communities. The Irular and Kurumbar communities reside inside the reserve forest. They come into contact with gaurs when they go for honey gathering or any other work inside the forest. When gaurs could not find food inside the forest, they sometimes come inside the manai (the villages of Irular and Kurumbar) and feed the plants and leaves of particular trees grown near the houses.

A common story people have about the origin of gaurs is that gaurs are domestic cattle that got lost inside the forests when left for feeding. This perspective was put forth not only by one community in the landscape but was shared among the tribal communities who are native to the landscape as well as the people who came and settled in the landscape 40–50 years ago.

"The cattle raised by people, when left for feeding, got lost inside the sholas, and after years, they returned as gaurs," said a villager from Indra Nagar colony.

"For the Hethai Amma temple, the Badagar community gives a calf as a vow. They will leave that calf as a vow inside the forest. And by that, gaurs have originated," said a villager from Ambedkar Nagar colony.

"Many years ago, when there was famine on the mainland, people used to bring many cattle, create a camp in the foothills, and leave the cattle for feeding inside the forest. When some cattle got lost inside the forest and didn't come back, later they turned into gaurs," from the FGD in Kotada tea estate.

"The gaurs which we see now are the later version of cattle which were raised in large groups by the Irula community," said a Toda tribesman.

"I'm wondering how gaurs have formed. Maybe it's the cattle that our ancestors raised before. Maybe the female domesticated cattle would have mated with the wild cattle or buffalo, and then gaurs could have formed," said an Irular tribesman.

MUTUAL RESPECT: A DRIVING FACTOR FOR COEXISTENCE

Coexistence is referred to as a dynamic but sustainable state when humans and wildlife co-adapt to living in shared landscapes, and human interactions with wildlife are governed by effective institutions that ensure long-term wildlife population persistence, social legitimacy, and tolerable levels of risk (Carter & Linnell, 2016). Mutual respect is about everyone being valued for who they are. In order to share spaces between humans and wildlife, there must be mutual respect between humans and wildlife. In the study area, humans and gaurs are possibly co-adapting as they have mutual respect.

A relationship based on fear and respect between the gaur and human populations favours coexistence in the landscape. However, the scenario was not the same when gaurs started to enter the human-dominated areas 20–25 years ago.

"I have been living here for more than forty years. When I was a child, we came here as Sri Lankan repatriates. I saw a gaur for the first time between 1993 and 1995 when I was working in a bungalow near a tea estate. Suddenly, one night, 30 gaurs came near the bungalow. When I saw it for the first time, it really scared me. I wondered, What is this? What a huge animal! That`s all... It is impossible for humans to live in the future here. These animals will start to occupy these spaces, it seems," said a villager residing in the Ambedkar Nagar colony.

People's fear in the initial days changed as respect combined with fear. Over the years, people have become aware, and their perception of gaurs has changed as they get more accustomed to their presence. As people notice the activities of gaurs more often, if questioned by any people in the landscape (even children), they recite that gaurs come only for food and water.

"I still remember when the first time I saw the gaur, I saw it with amazement. Now, we're used to the presence of gaurs. Over the years, we started to understand that gaurs are gentle and harmless beings. They come inside the villages only for food (grass and plants) and water. So, we have come to a state of accepting them in human-dominated landscapes," said another villager from the same colony.

"Gaurs come inside the villages for feeding as there are no different varieties of food for them inside the shola. Next, they feel safer when they are near humans; they think that they can escape from predators if they are near humans. Now, gaurs have become very close to humans. Maybe, in the next generation, they will speak to humans." from the FGD done in Mettukkal (Irula) village.

There are negative consequences because of gaurs entering residential areas such as damage to property. However, such instances are few and far between. Though people in the landscape have shared space with gaurs for more than 20 years, they are still afraid to go near them. There are instances where gaurs walk on the same road where people commute or graze in the same estate where women workers pluck tea leaves. People have close interactions with gaurs in different situations like these. If asked whether gaurs harm humans, like a written mantra, they answer, *"If we do not harm it, it will not harm us."* This is a common mantra from people belonging to all the communities in the landscape.



A person stops at a safe distance when a gaur comes out of bushes | Credit: Pavithran M M

"If a gaur is in my way, I will let it pass. If they come near our home, we close the doors and stay inside. Apart from old male gaurs, it is rare to see a herd walking on the main road where there is a lot of human presence. We share mutual respect here; otherwise, coexistence is not possible. If we don't harm it, it won't harm us," said a villager from the Idukorai colony.

"If gaurs are close by, we get scared. If we see it unexpectedly, we move out of their way. If we get too close, they may harm us out of self-defence. If it is aggressive, we should keep away." from the FGD done in Mettukkal (Irula) Village.

Observations of the colony people made them think that gaurs obey Badagar people's words—if they tell it to go away in their language, it will move aside. The Irular community people perform some action with their towels on gaurs and tell them something in their language, and it will move away. However, the Badagar and Irular communities say, *"With love and care, if anybody tells it to move away, it will surely go away from their way."*

People say, *'Kai eduthu kumbutu po saami na poirum'* (when bowed by joining both hands and asking it to move away, it will surely go away).

PERCEPTIONS OF THE RESEARCHER

Before the study, the principal investigator (PI) did not find gaurs to be very impressive and overlooked them when exploring the landscape as a tourist. During fieldwork, the PI observed gaurs, followed them at a safe distance for pictures for the study, and conversed with people at tea shops and on buses to understand their behaviour. Earlier, if asked why the gaurs were entering residential areas, the PI would have no answer. However, after the fieldwork, the PI can firmly say that they come only in search of food and water.

MYTHOLOGIES AND LEGENDS: FACILITATING NATURE-CULTURE RELATIONSHIPS

Myths are about the unknown; it is about that for which we have no words at first. Myths, therefore, look into the heart of a great silence (Armstrong, 2008). In the modern sense, mythology was not about theology but the human experience.

Mythology is a process of constructing meaning from the world around us. It is not an early attempt at history and does not claim that its tales are objective facts. Like a novel, an opera, or a ballet, myths are make-believe; they are games that transfigure our fragmented, tragic world and help us glimpse new possibilities by asking ‘what if?’ – a question that has also provoked some of our most important discoveries in philosophy, science, and technology (Armstrong, 2008).

Gaurs are also the subject of certain myths created by people who have lived with them for over two decades. The presence of local myths about gaurs makes people aware of the animal. The myths may have transferred from one generation to another. They also have the potential to pass on to future generations, which could act as a factor in sharing spaces in the future.

Across communities in the study area, people shared the belief of ‘*Kaatu Eruma nakkuna thole uringitu vanthurum*’ (when gaurs lick human skin, the skin will tear). Such a myth has been in practice to make people not go near gaurs and be aware of them. The villagers also say, ‘*Kaatu Eruma moochu kathu pata udambula allergy vanthrurm*’ -

(gaurs' breath can cause an allergy in the human body), which is also told to make people maintain a safe distance from gaurs. These myths create fear in people about the animals, which facilitates the coexistence in the landscape.

"If the breath of gaur touches our skin, we will get allergic. It is not good to stamp the dung of gaurs. Even if the tail of a gaur touches our skin, it will create an allergy. If gaurs lick the skin, the skin will tear."

Sometimes, it will make us fall down and lick our soles, and our legs will get disabled. The head portion of gaur will be very strong, like steel," said a villager of Ambedkar Nagar colony.

"Gaurs are the extended version of Ravana (a multi-headed demon king). That's why gaurs don't come into contact with monkeys, as monkeys are Lord Hanuman," said an 83 old Irular tribeswoman.

DODDU AATAM: A COMMUNITY PERFORMANCE BY THE IRULAR TRIBES

Doddu Aatam or 'Gaur Dance' is a community performance conducted by the Irular community that mimics the movement of gaurs. *Doddu* (meaning big) is the name for gaurs in the Irular language. Earlier, the play was performed in all the Irular and nearby Kurumba villages. But, now, it is being performed only in two Irular villages in the Kotagiri taluk, namely Vakkanamaram and Mettukkal.

Like *Doddu Aatam*, a community performance was also practised in the Irular villages under the Gudalur region called *Emme Aatam* (*emme* refers to buffalo in Kannada).



Right: An Irula man during the *doddu aatam* performance
Credit: Pavithran M M



A scene from the *Doddu Aatam* performance showing the gaur | Credit: Pavithran M M

Doddu Aatam has been in practice for many years. It is a play that was performed for seven nights during Pongal, a multi-day harvest festival with the third day dedicated to cattle. Now, the play has been shortened due to time constraints. The play, which happens in the Mettukkal and Vakkanamaram villages, lasts three nights.

“The play is most beautiful when performed at night since we cannot exactly disguise the characters; we roughly recreate them, and the darkness helps us and hides our mistakes”, said an Irular tribesman when asked why they perform at night.

Several characters appear in the play, including a tiger, a gaur, a white man and woman, an Irula man and Irula woman, forest officials, a clown, and a horse.

During the first two nights of the play, people indulge in the characters and imitate them. Also, traditional musical instruments are played while the characters are in motion.

After the first two nights, the tiger attacks the gaur on the third night. The Irular man and woman will approach the forest officials to shoot down the tiger, and as requested, a forest official does so on the fourth day.

The costumes used for the play are then burnt, and the performers head to a nearby river to throw the ashes and bathe. They then visit a neighbouring temple, where they cook and eat before returning home. Also, the people who volunteered to portray different roles are not supposed to stay inside their homes during the entire duration of the performance, i.e., three days. “There are many characters in the play, but we call the play in the name of gaur (*Doddu*) because we feel that gaurs are the merging point between people and forest (humans and nature)”, said an interviewee from Mettukkal village.

The Irular tribal community started performing *Doddu Aatam* for various reasons. People from all the villages say it is done to stop bad things from happening to the community. Previously, when there were certain health problems in the village, people thought that by staging a play like this, the village would return to normal and be good. The other reason is that gaurs are domestic cattle people raised a century ago. Earlier, every household had raised a significant number of cattle, perhaps more than a hundred. So, it took more work for people to care for each cattle. When cattle did not obey people's words, they cursed the cattle for not listening to their commands and said they would no longer feed them.

As a result, the cattle began to roam freely inside the forest. They later mated with wild buffalo and gave birth to gaurs - the origin of gaurs. As they roamed inside the forest, the tigers became their predators - the scenario in *Doddu Aatam*. People believed they had mistreated the cattle (an earlier version of the gaurs). Therefore, they are performing *Doddu Aatam* to compensate for their error of not caring for the cattle. Another reason is to raise awareness.

Emme Aatam, a performance that is similar to *Doddu Aatam*, was performed in the Irular villages in the Gudalur region to raise awareness of the wild animals within the forest because previously, people were more dependent on the forest, said a staff member from the Irular community at the Tribal Research Centre.

"Doddu Aatam is conducted to prevent losses between domestic and wild animals. Performing Dhoddu Aatam is sheer (a ritual). It is performed to protect domestic animals from predators. And it is performed to remove all the bad happenings, bad fates, and misfortunes in the village. Earlier, it was performed for seven nights. Now we have shortened it due to time constraints. After the last night of the play, the next morning, people who had roles in the play will throw away the ashes of the burnt costumes in the river, take a bath, worship in the temple, cook and eat there, and come back home. It is a belief that if such a thing is done, then all the bad fates of the village will be removed," from the FGD conducted in Mettukkal Irular village.

FEAR AND SHARED SPACES

Gaurs appeared in the human-dominated landscapes in Kotagiri and neighbouring parts 25-30 years ago. People have slowly become conscious of gaurs and started sharing spaces over the past few years. Awareness about gaurs and mutual respect are the key elements for shared spaces in the landscape. At times, wild animals like leopards, bears, and wild dogs also enter residential areas in search of prey. People's perspective towards wild dogs, leopards, and bears is different from their perspective towards gaurs. With gaurs, people feel they are gentle and harmless beings; they come only for food and water and do not harm anyone unless harmed.

As people notice gaurs for an extended period and are aware of their characteristics, they fear gaurs. Even though gaurs frequently roam in human-dominated landscapes, they are not domestic but wild animals. Nobody can predict the mood of a wild animal. Fear is the mechanism through which many of the non-lethal tools for mitigating negative human-wildlife interactions operate (Gaynor et al., 2020). People fear, "What if the gaur attacks us if we go nearby? What if the gaur charges back if we throw stones at it?" Similarly, gaurs experience fear when people approach them closely, "What if they take away our calves? What if they attack us?" In the shared landscape, gaurs and humans always keep a safe distance from one another.

Fear acts as a key to mutual avoidance between gaurs and people. Coexistence between gaurs and people in the landscape is made possible by this fear among people, and vice versa.

PERSPECTIVE OF THE TOURISTS



Tourists taking pictures of a gaur feeding near a residential area | Credit: Pavithran M M

The Nilgiris district is a tourist destination. People from other parts of Tamil Nadu and other states like Kerala, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, etc. visit the Nilgiris. Ootacamund - the queen of hills, which was derived from Othakal Mund (a toda village), known for its breezy climate, is populated by many tourists during the summer seasons. Ooty has been receiving, on average, about 2.5 million tourists annually (Ramamoorthi. D., 2019). Kotagiri, which is 28 kilometres away from Ooty, is also becoming increasingly popular among tourists since the place is calmer and less congested than Ooty.

Tourists who visit Kotagiri mistake gaurs for domestic buffaloes. Once they recognise them as gaurs, they get excited and approach gaurs to take pictures without knowing the aggressiveness of gaurs. Sometimes, they even go near it for selfies. This behaviour often aggravates the gaurs as it threatens their safety, and in turn, the gaurs may attack the tourists. Nowadays, gaurs are becoming a common tourist attraction in hill stations like Kotagiri, Coonoor, Valparai, Kodaikanal etc. Unlike the locals, tourists are unfamiliar with the behaviour of gaurs.

CONCLUSION

In Kotagiri, home to many different communities, an effort has been undertaken to investigate the sociocultural aspects of human-gaur relationships. People from diverse communities in the landscape view gaurs as domestic cattle that were lost in the forest and are gentle and harmless beings. Due to mutual respect, avoidance, and fear in people and gaurs, gaurs and humans can coexist in the landscape with little adverse effect. Gaurs and people always maintain a safe distance from one another in the shared landscape. Fear is a fundamental factor in mutual avoidance between humans and gaurs.

Mythologies and beliefs about gaurs carry the human-gaur relationship from generation to generation. Similarly, the cultural performance of *Doddu Aatam* by the Irular Tribal community shows their prolonged connection with the forest and wildlife. Tourists with no background knowledge about gaurs have different perceptions from those of locals. For them, sighting a gaur is an exciting moment, which makes them go closer to gaurs to click pictures. Gaurs in Kotagiri have started consuming food waste as the grasslands are becoming more fragmented, and the landscape is becoming more urbanised. It is uncertain whether the current human-gaur relationships will remain the same.

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