

## INTRODUCTION

*The car hurtles through the countryside, passing stretches of rice paddy dotted with coconut, banana and mango trees.<sup>1</sup> As the fields grow smaller and buildings come into view, the car slows to fit a denser traffic pattern. Entering the city now, it becomes part of a circulating mass of vehicles, dodging the pedestrians and animals that mill about the busy streets. At first glance, it seems that the concrete has stamped out any remnants of agricultural production, but taking a closer look, I see green leaves poking above terraces and small trees growing from the plots in front of thatched homes. Looking closer still, I find myself enmeshed in a web of connections linking people, food, ideas and institutions – connections that begin to make up the urban agriculture network in Madurai.*

Some may consider urban agriculture (UA) a relatively new phenomenon. While this is patently false,<sup>2</sup> scholarship on it has been sparse until recently. This study aims to bring to light some of the ways in which UA forms networks in the developing South Indian city of Madurai. To do so, I draw on agrarianism, an ancient ideology that positions agriculture as good for people, communities, and the environment. Though often deemed incompatible with urbanity, agrarianism provides a useful lens through which to understand the practices and motivations of urban farmers.

Thus, my study asks *How can Madurai's UA be agrarian?* and *What happens when agrarian ideas are pushed through a developing urban setting?* To answer these questions, I first establish a working conception of agrarianism, then inject it into three systems – the Gandhi Museum agricultural program, a small business called eGarden, and the Freedom bazaar, an initiative at Madurai Central Prison. In exploring these three seemingly dissimilar initiatives, I find that UA in Madurai retains aspects of agrarianism in its (real or perceived) ability to cultivate morality, but distorts traditionally agrarian ideals by using elements of expansionist capitalism and technology to propagate them. Urban agricultural agrarianism thus adapts itself to fit the condensed spatial and interpersonal relationships inherent to the city, forging bonds

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<sup>1</sup> See Figure 1.

<sup>2</sup> See Mougeout 2006:3 for a mention of ancient UA.

<sup>3</sup> Ajith, Nalini, Thaneesha, Hari and Juana are pseudonyms. Bala and eGarden are not, as per his request.

among people more than between people and the land. The formation of moral, economic and environmental connections is the key to cultivating what Amartya Sen (1999) and others would call the ultimate goal of development – freedom.

## CONTEXT

Before delving into agrarianism and freedom, I will first contextualize them with a mention of urban agriculture and Madurai.

Simply put, UA is the practice of raising plant or animal crops within a relatively metropolitan area. Of course this is a very nebulous definition, but I think it reflects the nebulous nature of UA. Luc Mougeot puts it a bit more carefully:

Urban agriculture is an industry located within (intra-urban) or on the fringe (peri-urban) of a town, a city or a metropolis, which grows and raises, processes and distributes a diversity of food and non-food products, (re-)using largely human and material resources, products and services found in and around that urban area, and in turn supplying human and material resources, products and services largely to that urban area. (Mougeot 2000 as cited in Mougeot 2005)

Mougeot understands that UA relies on human resources as well as material ones, and that UA schemes become sustainable through local recycling of said resources.

The side of UA most relevant to my study is its conception and practice in the developing world. Orsini et al. (2013) provide a solid introduction to this issue, surveying the factors affecting UA in Asia, Africa and South America and the implications, positive and negative, that UA has for food security, environmental stability, and social inclusion. Horticulture – the cultivation of fruits, vegetables and other plants (excluding grains) – maximizes the benefits of UA, they claim, because of plants' high value, high perishability and relatively low space demands (2013:703-705). My study heeds this part of the article's argument by focusing on

Madurai's plant production while leaving the massive sector of livestock rearing to future researchers.

The Resource Centres on Urban Agriculture and Food Security (RUAF)'s volume *Cities Farming For The Future: Urban Agriculture For Green And Productive Cities* (2006) gives more specific examples of UA in action. The fourteen chapters each present a different tool, be it governmental, financial, technological, etc., that has implications for the sustainable development of UA. Together, the case studies suggest that UA has been and will continue to be vital in global development.

Of course, within the developing world, UA varies from city to city. Thus, a short introduction to Madurai is in order, particularly as it relates to agriculture and development.

Madurai is one of the major cities in Tamil Nadu, India's southeastern most state. As of 2011, the city was home to 1,016,885 people (censusindia.gov 2011). The weather is hot and dry for much of the year, with an average temperature of 96 °F and an average rainfall of 33 inches, coming mostly during the autumn rainy season (Indian Meteorological Department 2011). Outside of the city is extensive farmland dominated by rice paddy (Department of Agriculture, Cooperation & Farmer's Welfare 2011).

Importantly, Madurai does not fit with the typical definition of a city. Despite its relatively large population, Madurai retains aspects of the smaller settlement it once was. The poet A.K. Ramanujan (in 1970, notably) described Madurai as "rurban," or "a center continuous with the countryside" (as cited in Seizer 2000:250). Nalini, a citizen I spoke with, called it "a big village only," while others have used the similar term "overgrown village" (Seizer 2000:250). Such conceptions are important to keep in mind as my argument proceeds, as they complicate the urban/rural dichotomy that pervades discussions of agrarianism. Madurai

provides a unique site for testing the agrarian ideal, one that should not be generalized to represent the global state of UA.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Agrarianism

“Agrarianism, we might say, represents the most complex and far-reaching accounting system ever known...” (Wirzba 2003:4)

This paper will not provide a clean and cogent definition of agrarianism. Doing so would be limiting in this ethnographic setting and counterproductive to the subtleties of my argument. Instead, I will bring together a small body of works to form a rough conception of the agrarian ideal that provides reference without overwhelming my subjects’ voices.

A good place to start is with M. Thomas Inge’s conceptualization of agrarianism. Inge’s widely cited book, *Agrarianism in American Literature*, discusses agrarianism through five tenets, summarized by Paul B. Thompson (2010) as:

1. *Religion*. Farming reminds humanity of its finitude and dependence on God.
2. *Romance*. Technology corrupts; nature redeems.
3. *Moral Ontology*. Farming produces a sense of harmony and integration, while modern society is alienating and fragmenting.
4. *Politics*. Rural autochthony provides the backbone for democracy.
5. *Society*. Rural interdependencies and reciprocities provide a model for healthy community. (2010:7)

By “autochthony” Thompson presumably means what Clay (2010) calls “the modern term for the belief of some Greeks that their ancestors had sprung from the earth of their native land.” Autochthony is part of the broader dichotomy that Inge acknowledges between urban and rural ways of life. The urban represents the corrupting force of technology that drives the alienating engine of industrial capitalism, while the rural represents simplicity and harmony in its recognition of limits. Each of Inge’s tenets presents the two as irreconcilable.

In “Nature Politics and the Philosophy of Agriculture” (2012), Thompson complicates the agrarian/industrial dichotomy. After positioning agriculture at the nexus between political theory and environmental philosophy, he presents the case of Ancient Greece, arguably the birthplace of agrarian thought. Greek thinkers, from Socrates to Hesiod, saw humans as an extension of their environment: “there is...no good person without a good environment” (2012:218). On this view, those who cultivate land simultaneously cultivate in themselves morality and civility. Thompson then considers the arguments in favor of industrialization, such as the increase in efficiency that comes with specialization, and against it, such as the externalization of costs. Juxtaposing these arguments again with the agrarian ideal, Thompson formulates an agrarian ontology inclusive of consumers who are not directly involved in food production but who, through farmer’s markets and the like, synchronize somewhat with nature’s patterns. For Thompson, the divide between agrarianism and industrialism is “less a dichotomy than a dialectic” (2012:231).

In a similar vein, some have posited that an understanding of “urban agrarianism” may ease the antagonization of cities by farmers, and vice versa. Urbanites can become stewards of public spaces other than farmland (neighborhoods, playgrounds, parks), and can grow closer to food production through conscientious consumption (Wirzba 2003:6).

Other scholars are less subtle. Take, for instance, Wendell Berry’s (2003) statement:

I believe that this contest between industrialism and agrarianism now defines the most fundamental human difference, for it divides not just two nearly opposite concepts of agriculture and land use, but also two nearly opposite ways of understanding ourselves, our fellow creatures, and our world. (2003:24)

Industrialism, for Berry, is “the way of the machine” (2003:24). It ignores the dignity of living things, fosters economic uniformity and colonialism, destroys small communities, and externalizes its costs, often with violent results. Agrarianism, on the other hand, is the recognition of that land is “an immeasurable gift” (2003:26), shrouded in wondrous mystery and

deserving of our stewardship. Berry's short essay concludes that "[t]he agrarian standard, inescapably, is local adaptation, which requires bringing local nature, local people, local economy, and local culture into a practical and enduring harmony" (2003:33). If every community stewards a small piece of land, together we can steward the world.

Inge, Thompson, Wirzba and Berry's discussion of agrarianism in the Western context provides insights to UA globally. It raises and complicates agrarian-industrial, rural-urban and local-cosmopolitan dichotomies, all of which I will further discuss and dissolve in applying them to the urban setting. We must also consider, however, more local South Asian and Tamil conceptualizations of the agrarian ideal.

David Ludden (1999) discusses marginal communities' historical connections to land in *Agrarian History of South Asia*. In doing so, he comments on the subjugation of agrarian communities by the colonizing writers of history. Accounts prevail in which "agrarian folk appear as a negative mirror image of all that is urban, industrial, and modern; not as makers of history, but rather as inhabitants of history" (1999:7). This is because "modernity's urban middle classes around the world detached themselves from agrarian life and took history with them" (1999:32). Agrarianism has thus become timeless and artificially positioned as incompatible with modernity, Ludden argues.

Ananad Pandian (2009) takes a closer look at one such community abandoned by history – the "criminal tribe" of PIRAMALAI KALLARS of Tamil Nadu. "[H]ow do people come to live as they ought to live?" (2009:3) Pandian asks, using the Kallars as a testing ground. He argues that the answer lies in the cultivation, not the denial, of natural life. This idea of moral cultivation is at the heart of agrarian ideology and "has been essential to the pursuit of modernity in south India" (2009:3). To show how, Pandian analyzes five different virtues – "civility, propriety,

restraint, toil, and sympathy” (2009:15) – in their historical, literary and agricultural significance to the development of a good life. I use Pandian’s conception of toil to discuss the implications of technology, while borrowing his general theme, “cultivating virtue”, to find many instances in which UA promotes morality.

Though complexities abound, it should be somewhat clear from the above sources that agrarian thought positions agriculture as an activity, or more accurately a lifestyle, that imbues good things upon its practitioners in ways beyond food production. It should also have emerged that agrarianism is often (though not always) defined negatively, that is, in contrast with urbanism, industry, modernity, and capitalist economy. Understanding these aspects of the agrarian ideal will be necessary as we trace its interactions with an urban space.

Having established some broad strokes and local conceptions of agrarianism, I will now introduce the idea of freedom in UA. I choose to pursue this theme when I discovered the name of the bazaar program in Madurai and the rest of Tamil Nadu’s prisons – “Freedom.” The local use of this English word puzzled me – how can an institution defined by the restriction of freedom publicly espouse it? Freedom thus became a critical part of my analysis, not only for the prison but also for other case studies.

The iteration of freedom I use draws on Amartya Sen’s (1999) *Development as Freedom*. The crux of Sen’s argument is that development should be seen “as a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy” (1999:3). For Sen, the increase in personal freedoms, from education to political participation to healthcare access, should be the means and ends of economic development. In doing so he calls for an “agent-oriented view” (1999:11) of economics, one that considers subjects of development as more than mere recipients. Despite the many critiques of Sen, his association of freedom with personal agency and opportunity provides

useful reference for my study. In adapting Sen's freedom to Madurai's UA, I find that agency and opportunities result from integration with networks, both inside and outside of the prison. To build connections, then, is to cultivate freedom.

## **METHODS**

My study draws primarily on three agricultural endeavors in Madurai – the Gandhi Museum program, a small business called eGarden, and the bazaar at Madurai Central Prison. This section will introduce each, along with the methods I used to gather data.

Beside a museum showcasing the Mahatma's life and India's struggle for freedom, Madurai's Gandhi Museum quietly maintains an agricultural program. It hosts monthly organic gardening classes, and in its bookstore sells books and pamphlets on farming and traditional medicine. Over the course of my research, I met several times with a bookstore employee named Ajith, who helps run the classes and intends to start a garden on the bookstore's roof. To gather data, I participated in several planning sessions for the garden, in addition to informal conversations and a semi-structured interview.

eGarden is a small business that sets up organic home gardens in Madurai. Run by a group of college students, the business provides the materials and labor necessary for customers to start growing vegetables at home. To learn about eGarden, I accompanied its team on three occasions, during which we visited sites, met with clients and potential partners, and chatted at tea stalls across the city. I also conducted interviews with the CEO, Bala, at the beginning and end of the research period.

The bazaar at Madurai Central Prison is part of a statewide initiative named "Freedom," through which prisoners grow crops and make crafts that they sell to the public. Madurai's

inmates cultivate greens, mushrooms and fish to sell at the bazaar just outside of the prison's walls. Sixty prisoners work at a time, either tending to the crops or vending at the bazaar. Officials select these prisoners on a rotational basis and assign duties based on severity of crimes and in-prison behavior. I visited the Madurai prison bazaar twice, once with a Tamil translator and once with a SITA faculty member, during which visits I observed the goings-on, interviewed a prison official involved with the program, and made small purchases as a means of participant observation.

To supplement the data from these institutions, I conducted interviews with four gardeners in Madurai. The first, Nalini, is a middle-aged woman who keeps a small garden at her apartment; the second, Thaneesha, is an older female friend of Nalini whose house has an extensive ornamental garden; the third, Hari, is a professional gardener who works at a hospital in Madurai, and the fourth, Juana, is a doctor who, with eGarden's help, recently started a vegetable garden on her terrace.<sup>3</sup>

The data I acquired and my subsequent analysis are unquestionably influenced by who I am – a young, college-educated, American male. My identity helped me interact with some of my participants, namely the eGarden employees, in a more casual and intimate matter, while perhaps distancing me from older female subjects, especially as I toured the gardens in their home spaces. It also brought a language barrier, as I speak very little Tamil. The people I spoke with in English were more or less fluent, but misunderstandings by both parties were commonplace. I interviewed Hari through a translator, which lengthens the chain of conveying meaning.

Most notably, it often seemed that participants in my research saw something to gain from making connections with me. Ajith wanted me to help plan and construct the terrace

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<sup>3</sup> Ajith, Nalini, Thaneesha, Hari and Juana are pseudonyms. Bala and eGarden are not, as per his request.

garden, which would help the bookstore gain publicity and international appeal. For Bala, forging a relationship with me could help his business gain exposure, and even lay groundwork for expansion into America. He asked me several times about American people or corporations who may be interested in his projects, and at one point said that he intends move to Manhattan in two years. That these people had reasons to connect with me, while raising unanswerable questions about the authenticity of some of their words and actions, contributes to the part of my argument concerning the spread of agrarianism through non-agrarian connection building.

Prison officials, on the other hand, may have seen less to gain from interacting with me. Perhaps the potential for a critical foreign exposé outweighed the benefits of my publicizing the program, which has already been well covered in newspaper articles.<sup>4</sup> Regardless of bazaar participants' desire to engage, my data were limited by bureaucratic regulations. Speaking to prisoners directly, in person or via a questionnaire, would have required reams of paperwork that could not be settled in the month-long period over which I conducted my research.

My methodological experience informs the structure of my analysis. Since research and real life are not organized thematically, I do not distinguish my major sections by theme, opting instead to use the three institutions as the bases for division. Within both of the first two sections (regarding the Gandhi Museum and eGarden) I separate my analysis into two subsections – “holding to agrarian ideals” and “the non-agrarian side” – a duality that I drop upon reaching the Freedom bazaar section. Furthermore, I weave the individual gardener interviews throughout my discussion of the Gandhi Museum and eGarden to support and expand upon certain ideas. This technique, though potentially jarring, should show the interconnectedness of individual and institutional agrarian values as they become integrated within the UA network. To mirror prison's isolating effect, I avoid these supplemental interviews in my analysis of the Freedom

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<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Times of India 2014.

bazaar. As the paper concludes, though, thematic connections will dissolve this isolation, and freedom will flow.

## THE GANDHI GARDEN

### Holding to Agrarian Ideals

*I walk through the front gate toward the soaring white dome. Approaching the museum entrance, I pass signs bearing Gandhi's face and listing his virtues. I turn left at the bronze statue of the marching Mahatma and walk through a shady area to the bookstore. I leave my sandals by the small potted plants, climb the three steps, and enter the building. Peering into Ajith's office now, I see Gandhi's face gracing a calendar that hangs above the computer. I take a seat, and we begin to talk.*

The first site for exploring the injection of agrarianism into Madurai's UA is Ajith's office, or the images of Gandhi in and around it. Gandhi's ideas, according to some scholars, are fundamentally agrarian (Sanford 2013). Ajith himself is aware of this fact – twice he told me that agriculture was part of Gandhi's Constructive Program, and claimed that “sustainable living” is the Gandhian way. When the agrarian ideal is pushed through a Gandhian context, then, roughly five virtues emerge<sup>5</sup> – nonviolence, self-sufficiency, simplicity, public service, and village living – each of which can be directly connected to the UA undertaken and espoused at the museum and beyond. I will not explain how each of these virtues is Gandhian, as existing literature has satisfied this, but will focus on how the Gandhi Museum's brand of UA promotes each.

Let us begin with nonviolence toward the body, or health. To spread this virtue, Ajith's bookstore sells literature on traditional medicine alongside powdered medicinal herbs. These herbs, though currently purchased from village growers, will soon be cultivated in and around the bookstore. The organic gardening workshops, co-run by a Tamil natural cure organization,

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<sup>5</sup> The first four of these virtues are directly adapted from Sanford 2013.

compound medicine with nutrition by advocating for the wholesome native millets of kambu and sorghum over wheat and rice. Understandably, then, health is among Ajith's favorite topics of conversation. "Coca-Cola and Pepsi are dangerous," he once told me, recommending instead easy-to-grow hibiscus-lemon juice, aloe vera juice, or herbal tea, which should be sweetened not with white sugar but with unrefined jaggery or honey. Ajith is but one of many agriculturalists concerned with the cultivation of health. Nalini, who has grown both ornamental and medicinal plants in her garden, claims to have not taken conventional medicine for five years, as homeopathy has kept her healthy. "Food is your medicine," she said, advising a diet rich in greens and millets. A booklet on terrace gardening claims that with proper nutrition, people should be living 120 years (Balaji n.d.:7). Whether or not this is true, it speaks loudly to gardeners' faith in the natural lifestyle.

Just as the Greeks saw "no good person without a good environment," Ajith and others see no healthy body without a healthy environment. The Gandhian program thus teaches organic practices only, encouraging farmers to direct nonviolence toward both their bodies and the soil organisms by eschewing chemical pesticides and fertilizers.<sup>6</sup> Relatedly, the program teaches composting, which reduces waste that would otherwise cause harm by polluting the environment.

The second Gandhian-agrarian virtue, self-sufficiency, can also be traced in the gardening workshops. According to Ajith, Gandhi represents the "extreme" of self-sufficiency, an extreme that workshop attendees approach by learning to grow their own food. Doing so increases not only food security, but also economic self-sufficiency. Ajith claims that typical Madurains spend "250 rupees" per week on produce – to regularly save this money could be

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<sup>6</sup> Vandana Shiva (1989) positions chemical and industrial agriculture as violence, which has helped me come to this converse claim.

economically empowering. Ajith believes that home gardeners can even earn money by growing and selling medicinal herbs, which fetch “ten to thirty rupees per plant.”

Simplicity, meanwhile, makes it easier for people to become self-sufficient. The practices Ajith espouses are markedly low-tech. In planning to build the garden, he suggested that we reuse old containers by filling them with soil taken from outside the bookstore, offering a shovel and a pan as the only tools. On his view, along with technology, expertise is unnecessary. We should go into projects “blind,” and simply let the “plant accept the area.” People can cultivate food without spending money, he further claims, citing as evidence the drumstick and curry trees that poor people grow on tiny plots in front of their homes.

The phenomenon of “zero budget farming” affirms this anti-capital sentiment. Consider the man I met who harvests cow and fish droppings to close the nutrient loop in his home garden at no cost.<sup>7</sup> Such is his faith in the zero budget technique that he plans to abandon his career as a travel agent to pursue farming. Ajith hopes to follow this model with the bookstore’s terrace garden by planting in recycled containers, soliciting seed donations, and practicing onsite composting.

As Ajith’s reluctance to spend money suggests, the museum is a nonprofit organization tasked with providing a public service. It does so by spreading the positive externalities<sup>8</sup> of bodily and environmental health. The natural lifestyle and earth-friendly practices it promotes, in a small way, reduce the city’s healthcare costs and preserve land and soil for future generations. Increasing plant life has other public benefits, which both Hari and Nalini recognize as cooling the atmosphere, providing oxygen, and making the city more attractive.

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<sup>7</sup> (discounting the considerable initial investment of acquiring these animals)

<sup>8</sup> “Positive effect[s] or benefit[s] realized by a third party resulting from a transaction in which they had no direct involvement” (businessdictionary.com).

Ajith posits that people enjoy the garden aesthetic because it reminds them of their village roots. People move from villages to cities for economic reasons, he explains, but bring gardening with them to preserve a piece of their past. He estimates that after retirement, “fifty percent” of urbanites move back to villages, demonstrating a desire to surround themselves with plant life. Hari echoes this in saying that the greenery around the hospital reminds some patients of home, as does Nalini in her retirement plan to move twenty kilometers outside of Madurai, where she will build a small house with a large garden and be “the happiest person in the world.” Ajith also sees value in the economic aspects of a village model. Gardeners form an intra-city network where they can share advice and barter – “one kilo tomato to you, one kilo brinjal to me.” What Ajith describes as their “interchange [of] products, ideas, lifestyles” follows the “rural interdependencies and reciprocities” of Inge’s agrarian model and suggests that agrarian micro-communities can fit within the urban context.

To Ajith, farming can “cultivate the habits” and instill “moral things” in its practitioners. The five virtues explained above show how, but leave out the important element of conveyance.

### The Non-Agrarian Side

*I enter my room, toss down my backpack, and switch on the fan. Remembering the conversation I had with Ajith earlier in the day, I pick up my phone and call Bala. I tell him about the project we are trying to start at the Gandhi Museum, and ask if he would be able to provide any grow bags. Sure, he says, listing all of the supplies his company sells. I tell him that Ajith will call him to figure out the details, and hang up. I then call Ajith and tell him the situation...Two days later is our tentatively planned groundbreaking for the Gandhi garden. With two American friends I head over to the museum, find Ajith in the bookstore, and ask him about getting started. He tells me that Bala would not provide the bags for free – his small business could not afford to make such donations – and that he still has not found seeds. He then invites the three of us to a village festival during which 400 goats will be slaughtered.*

To spread his agrarian message, Ajith relies on non-agrarian methods.

Consider first his hopes to make the garden at the Gandhi Museum an international showcase of agrarian virtue. In conscious emulation of the Sri Aurobindo society's establishment of Auroville, Ajith envisions foreigners cultivating a piece of land in India and dispelling the corrupting Western influence of "drinking" and "other waste." The garden, ideally expanding to include the tree-covered patch of land behind the bookstore, will present a virtuous model of the West – one that embraces practices of traditional Indian agriculture – to the "1000 to 3000" people who visit the museum each month. While Ajith's goal of moral cultivation is deeply agrarian, his emphasis on expansion, publicity and internationality is not. His cosmopolitan aspirations complicate the localism and village-centricity that previously seemed central to his agrarian ontology.

Economic participation is a more pressing non-agrarian concern. Due to Ajith's refusal to enter markets to purchase containers and seeds, the bookstore terrace garden is yet to be established. Thus, we see the shortcomings of a strictly zero budget practice. Relying on donations, at least in this context, has proven to be an unsustainable approach, as it simultaneously isolates the garden and reduces its self-sufficiency. Bala needs money to keep his business alive, not the "reciprocities" that Ajith offers.

In this way, the village model loses efficacy in the urban network. It can build connections among villagers taking organic gardening classes, but not between Ajith and the urban small businessmen from whom he needs supplies. Developing a community takes time, and time is not always available in the fluxional urban environment.

## EGARDEN

### Holding to Agrarian Ideals

*I climb the stairs, following Bala's lead, and reach the terrace. A green shade net is hangs over us, and we are surrounded by plants: radishes, spinach, herbs and more. "Hear that?" he asks. Apparently it is the sound of the plants speaking. I ask what they say. "Hi, how are you," he translates. We stand still for a moment and watch the wind tickle their leaves.*

Despite running a for-profit business, Bala's practice and motivations are very agrarian, often similar to Ajith's. To show this, I will bring up here another side of agrarianism that Ajith did not speak much about – connection to nature and religiousness. Then I will describe briefly how eGarden works toward three of the same agrarian ideals that the Gandhi garden espouses – nonviolence/health, public good, self-sufficiency – before discussing the value of tradition.

As the above anecdote shows, Bala feels a deep connection to the plants he grows. This attitude was widespread among gardeners I spoke with. Often using familial language, my subjects asserted their intimacy with plant life. "Plants are part of the family," Bala said in an interview, after showing me pictures of his recently harvested white radishes. For Nalini, "growing a plant is like growing a child." Thaneesha considers plants "like children" as well, and thus only shares them with people she can trust. Hari went furthest with the familial analogy, calling the plants he tends to his "first children" and admitting that he prefers to be with the plants than his human offspring. When asked how he felt about "nature," he reiterated this – since plants are his children, he loves nature.

Nature and plants are not one and the same, but connections to plants often enable connections to nature as a whole. When I asked Bala how he feels about nature, he replied, "I feel about nature...I am nature." Nature is everything, he believes, "nature is God." Despite being a self-proclaimed atheist, Bala recognizes the first tenet of Inge's agrarianism: "Farming reminds humanity of its finitude and dependence on God" (Thompson 2010:7). If nature is God

or everything, as Bala posits, then we truly are dependent on it. Other gardeners incorporated religion into their agricultural ontologies in a similar way. “Nature [is] God’s creation,” said Nalini; “when does a flower bloom, nobody knows.” This pervading mystery reveals both human limits and divine wonder. “Nature is offered to us by God,” Thaneesha further said, echoing Wendell Berry’s conception of land as an “immeasurable gift.”

Having established the religious side of agrarianism, let us return to the Gandhian-agrarian virtues of nonviolence, public good and self-sufficiency.

eGarden embraces bodily and environmental nonviolence. Bala started his business “to make people aware of chemical food.” Since the rampant use of pesticides and preservatives leads to health problems (such as “impotency for male and female”) his company sets up organic gardens only. This protects the environment just as it protects the body, and may be more profitable in the long run, if we accept Bala’s claim that “in doing natural agriculture, the yield of the plant is twice the yield of chemical [agriculture].”

Continuing to discuss his motivations for starting the business, Bala said that profit was never the goal. Rather, he sees himself as providing a public service. In addition to the positive externalities discussed in the Gandhi section, Bala wants to increase employment in the struggling agricultural sector by spreading awareness of organic techniques. He also wants to “fulfill the needs of all people” regardless of class by helping them start low cost, sustainable operations. Despite running a private company, Bala recognizes the value of public service.

Part of this value is in the promotion of self-sufficiency. eGarden helps set up gardens, but customers must maintain and harvest the gardens themselves. eGarden offers two free site visits after the “initial investment,” after which customers should be suitably empowered to reap the garden’s benefits. Juana demonstrates this, saying that eGarden was very helpful in initially

building her greenhouse, but has now left her to tend to the vegetables herself. Although her garden is too new to have yielded much produce, she “definitely” believes that in the near future it will support all of her family’s household vegetable consumption.

Just as Ajith (perhaps too enthusiastically) embraces the village roots of agriculture, Bala draws on the wisdom of tradition. The organic techniques that he uses are not new: “in the traditional way, people used to do natural agriculture,” he told me. Reclaiming this traditional mindset by eschewing modernity’s chemical pesticides and fertilizers has proven helpful for eGarden. In a more general discussion about Madurai’s development, Bala described the region as “originally” farmland that was invaded by northerners. Now, he points to the surge of software companies and textile mills as a sort of second invasion, suggesting that Madurains should learn from the past by returning to agrarian roots.

The means of doing so, however, is not so simple.

### The Non-Agrarian Side

*I find myself with Bala at a seed shop in downtown Madurai. After Bala buys a pack of spinach seeds, he and the shopkeeper have a short talk about cocopith – the ground coconut husk used as a soil substitute. The two men then exchange business cards, and we step outside. We mount Bala’s motorcycle and back out into the heavy traffic. Weaving between two buses now, Bala explains the interaction to me: “networking.” We squeeze out of the congestion and hurtle toward another one of his sites...Later that night Bala, two of his friends and I are at a tea stall. Bala begins to tell me his aspirations. Two years from now, there is “ninety percent” chance that he will move to Manhattan to expand his business. He wondered if I knew any people who would be interested.*

Despite promoting a vividly agrarian ideology, eGarden relies on non-agrarian cosmopolitanism, capitalism and technology in its propagation.

As the anecdote suggests, Bala wants to expand his business. One way of doing so is by connecting with shopkeepers, and another is by connecting with foreigners (and being featured

prominently in a research paper). The whole world has learned from Indian traditional agriculture, he told me, and now he wants to learn from other cultures. At times he asked me about UA in New York, or which crops grow best in the US. He recognizes that agriculture has become very globalized, mentioning once that “carrots come from Norway” and often testing the limits of what plants can grow on his Madurai terrace. In seeking international connections, both human and vegetable, Bala embraces cosmopolitanism over the “rural autochthony” that Inge considers agrarian. While eGarden promotes localism at the individual level, it reaches for cosmopolitanism in its development.<sup>9</sup>

eGarden further breaks localism in its extensive networking. In an interview, Bala talked about the importance of “social networking” in spreading its message to customers. Accordingly, eGarden has a Facebook page (with 563 “likes”), where it posts photo albums, promotional statuses, and job offers.<sup>10</sup> Bala also seeks frequent face-to-face interactions regarding the expansion of his business. Once I accompanied Bala to a site where he met with several men to discuss starting organic gardening classes. They sat in the would-be classroom, talking animatedly in Tamil about their plan of action. On another occasion, I was in Bala’s house watching a pixelated *Mummy* movie on the TV when it came time for Bala to attend a meeting with a human welfare organization about starting a self-help gardening program for women. He changed his shirt twice, dropped me off at my host family’s house, and continued to forge professional bonds.

eGarden espouses self-sufficiency, but itself relies on other actors. I experienced this dependence on a site visit to Juana’s terrace garden after her greenhouse was felled by a lightning strike. To fix the structure, we found a metalworker for a quote, which turned out to be

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<sup>9</sup> See Heldke 2012 for a complication of the local/cosmopolitan dichotomy.

<sup>10</sup> See Figure 2.

too high, then went to a tool rental shop to get a welding kit. On the way back, Bala told me that he had learned an important lesson – not to undertake construction projects without professional help.

Throughout our interactions, Bala articulated plans to make his business grow. eGarden is the just the beginning for Bala: “I want to make one penny more than Bill Gates,” he said memorably. Other than the aforementioned plan to move to Manhattan, Bala plans to buy “1000 acres” of land on which to grow organic produce and cotton, and will establish an online marketplace to sell these goods. In articulating these plans, Bala used corporate vocabulary such as “start-up,” “investment”, “protocol”, “margin” and “R and D”. He acknowledged that his “business model” is similar to those of non-agricultural companies, though his “services” and “protocol” differ.

Given all of this, I asked Bala “how is agriculture corporate?” “Good question,” he replied, before comparing a field to a factory. Such a conception is nothing new to industrial agriculture, but becomes interesting when pushed to the home gardens that eGarden sets up. An individual home garden cannot be corporate, Bala said, but a dozen gardens working together can be. “To be corporate you have to cooperate,” he explained. eGarden, then, corporatizes home gardening by linking households together. On this model, units of agrarian self-sufficiency join together in what could be considered a village-like micro-community, but in doing so become “corporate” – that is, anti-agrarian.

Leaving this puzzle for later exploration, let us consider the role of technology in eGarden. When asked how he felt about technology, Bala said, “good and bad.” He pointed to the fact that it can help increase yields, but also that a single piece of machinery can replace the work of “100 men.” In practice, eGarden deploys no such machinery, but does use several

products, namely sprinklers, shade nets, cocopith and grow bags, to make gardening more effective.

I saw pictures of the eGarden's first sprinklers on Bala's phone and also visited the site in person. Lining the inside of Juana's greenhouse, they make watering plants (a necessity during the dry season) very easy. The irrigated greenhouse thus controls the environment to an extent, reducing the uncertainty or mystery inherent to farming on the agrarian ideal. Shade nets function in a similar way. Madurai's sun can overwhelm vegetables, so hanging a porous green sheet over gardens makes the environment more hospitable. Cocopith and grow bags, meanwhile, work together to create a lightweight, semi-portable and highly absorbent home for plants. Used in combination with manure, cocopith is an effective growth medium. It is lighter than soil, and thus well suited to terraces, upon which excessive weight can cause structural damage and leaks. It also reduces the need for watering, as it absorbs more water than soil does. Green and black poly bags, which are lightweight and easy to fill, hold the mixture. Thus, fertile land is not a requisite for growing food in an urban setting. Agrarian connection to the land, resembling Inge's autochthony, can be circumvented through technology.

In direct contrast to the line "technology corrupts, nature redeems," consider the aforementioned case of Juana's lightning-struck greenhouse. Nature (lightning) corrupted technology (the metal structure). Now, technology has redeemed itself, as the greenhouse is again standing stronger than ever, even flaunting eGarden's first sprinkler system.<sup>11</sup>

Technology aims to make things easier for people, or reduce human toil. In the case of eGarden, it often succeeds. People can grow food without devoting their entire lives to it, as Juana's medical career indicates. Moreover, Bala, in some ways a "corporate" farmer, spends very little time actually tending to plants. His mother generously spends 30 minutes per day

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<sup>11</sup> See Figure 3.

watering and maintaining the home's experimental terrace, while he focuses on customer relations (and his academic studies). The agricultural toil that Pandian considers virtuous is thus wrested from Bala's practical ontology. This is not to say that Bala does not work hard; rather his business runs on a different form of toil – one involved less with working the land than working people. The land remains docile in its small bags while Bala rides around the city on his motorcycle, sowing and reaping Madurai's human landscape through networking, sales and expansion.

Through this imagery we see agrarian UA adapting itself to the condensed spatial and interpersonal relationships inherent to the city. Put simply, as an area becomes more urban, access to land decreases, but access to people increases. Thus, for an urban agricultural operation to be productive, connections to people must increase as connections to land decrease. Networking replaces sowing, service replaces reaping. With this in mind, the fragmentation that Inge saw as ruinous to moral ontology may in fact be beneficial to UA. Consider again Bala's "corporate" model of independent but interconnected home gardeners, whose lack of land is made up for by an abundance of care and intelligence. Here, multipliable human capital replaces divisible land capital. Just as surface area increases when wholes are split into parts, fragmentation allows the establishment of connections.

### So what is agrarian and what is anti-agrarian?

By this point it is worth abandoning the language of an agrarian/anti-agrarian dichotomy. Though the above case studies clearly show agrarian ideals propagated by non-agrarian practices, they also suggest a blending of the two. Examples such as Ajith's fantasy of an internationally recognized garden and Bala's fragmented "corporate" model speak to this

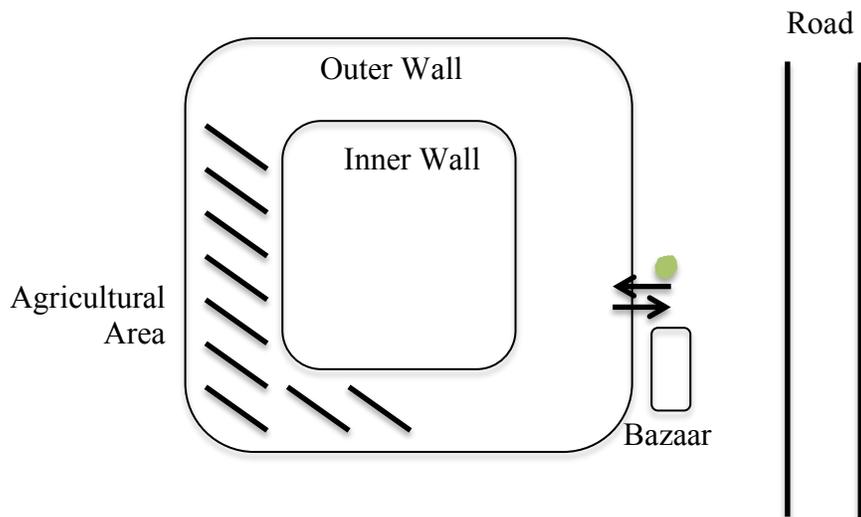
confusion. Up to now, the dichotomy has been a helpful heuristic, but as we delve into the murkier territory of the Madurai Central Prison, it may be more prescient to focus on the connections themselves rather than our classifications of them. In freeing my analysis from the helpful but limited duality it has heretofore relied on, I will free the prison program to build nuanced connections.

### **FREEDOM BAZAAR**

*From a distance the bazaar looks like a typical tea stall or snack bar, but as I walk up to the blue sign emblazoned with the words FREEDOM FREEDOM FREEDOM FREEDOM (etc.), I see a crowd of visitors milling about under a tree, guards with brown uniforms and guns, and the thick prison walls. At the counter, I make eye contact with a vendor and say “vazhaipalam.” He does not understand. “Banana!” I try again, to no avail. Then my partner, in smoother Tamil, repeats “vazhaipalam,” pointing at the clump of small green fruits hanging just above the counter. The vendor nods, handing me two and assuring my partner that despite their color, they are ripe and tender. I pay him six rupees and toss the bananas into my backpack.*

Bananas are among the many goods sold at the bazaar. The shelves are stocked with items – snacks, notebooks, textiles and more – from prisons around Tamil Nadu. Each prison in the state has a Freedom bazaar, thanks to actions taken by Chief Minister Jayalalitha in 2013. Since this inception, Madurai’s program has been gradually expanding, supplementing its small shop with in-prison production of mushrooms, vegetables, and, most recently, fish. Though prison regulations thwarted my attempts to see the agricultural operations, I was able to gather enough data to begin to explain the name *Freedom*. I found that through the program, inmates gain spatial, interpersonal and economic freedom by building connections with the outside world.

First, to understand the spatial dimension, consider this diagram:



When working in the nursery, mushroom hut or fish tank, prisoners occupy the area between the inner and outer walls. Cells are located inside of the inner walls, so working gives inmates an opportunity to spend time one step closer to the outside world. At the bazaar itself, prisoners get even closer. Vendors work from outside of the outer walls, in full view and with a full view of the city as it drives by. Some particularly trusted inmates even venture out of the prison complex completely to run brief errands for the bazaar. Prison restricts freedom by restricting physical mobility, so restoring mobility restores some degree of freedom.

With this physical freedom comes interpersonal freedom and uncertainty. In moving outside of the prison's outer walls, inmates interact with the public. I learned this most strikingly while interviewing a prison official who helped run the bazaar. I asked him why the bazaar was named Freedom, and he answered by telling me that the person who had just served me a Fanta, a slim, older man in a plaid lungi and a brown tank top, was a prisoner. Through the bazaar program, this inmate was able to interact with a member of the public who happened to be from America. Unpredictable exchanges such as this one may help free inmates from the monotony of

prison life.<sup>12</sup> Inmates experienced similar interactions when my partner and I made purchases from the bazaar. Though restricted from interviewing prisoners directly, we could talk to them, and they to us, as we examined products and asked questions.

As we exercised economic freedom in our purchases, prisoners gained economic freedom in their participation in the small market of the bazaar. According to the official I spoke with, prisoners employed in the program earn twenty percent of the bazaar's profits. This salary is not paid in cash, which is forbidden in the prison, but in credits loaded onto cards provided to the inmates. Prisoners then use this virtual money to buy goods from the bazaar. In this way, the intra-prison economy is a semi-closed loop. One could call it a zero budget economy, even, mirroring the cycling of nutrients in its cycling of currency and work.<sup>13</sup> Read cynically, the prison's circular economy could be a devious tactic by the state to extract free labor from inmates. The only products prisoners can purchase are products that they themselves labor to create, and they can only make these purchases after the institution has seized eighty percent of their labor's value. Read more generously, though, the program cultivates toil and economic interaction. Though positioned as opposing forces in the above sections (toil as agrarian, economics as non-agrarian), the two merge in the prison context. Farming instills virtue, but this virtue is not classically agrarian – it is the participation in the urban market. However artificially constructed and removed from the free market this participation is, it nonetheless connects prisoners with the outside world and instills some modicum of choice. Prisoners gain power in their ability to choose what to consume and whether to consume at all.

Prison, in a sense, represents the extreme of connection to the land. Prisoners are so connected that they, despite their deepest wishes, cannot leave. Through agriculture, prisoners

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<sup>12</sup> Michelle Brown develops the idea of uncertainty as freedom in “Of Prison, Gardens, and the Way Out” (2013).

<sup>13</sup> The prison also uses recycled wastewater on its crops and composts the facilities' solid organic waste.

are able to escape this overwhelming connection by embracing it, then transferring it, as food products, onto people. eGarden has shown that as connections to land decrease due to urban development, connections to people increase. The prison program tests the converse: as connections to people increase, do connections to land decrease? Does this decrease in connection to the land they are trying to escape (prison) constitute freedom? For the reasons I have explained above, I think the answer to both of these questions is yes. Connecting with people through the bazaar lets prisoners physically move outside of the prison's walls, either to vend the bazaar's goods or to run errands. It grants them uncertainty through interpersonal interactions, and allows them to participate in the urban economy, where, to some extent, they can exercise choice. With people lie connections, with connections lie choice, and with choice lies freedom.

## **CONCLUSION**

Before delving into the implications of the previous sentence, I will trace how my argument reached this point.

First, I assembled a working conception of the agrarian ideal. Then, I injected it into a small segment of Madurai's UA network. I found that the Gandhi Museum agricultural program retains agrarian virtues of nonviolence, self-sufficiency, simplicity, public service, and village life, while aspiring to expand into non-agrarian ideas of cosmopolitanism. eGarden similarly combines an agrarian connection to plants with nonviolence, public service, self-sufficiency and tradition, but uses an expansionist, technological, corporate model to spread these virtues. The prison bazaar further dissolves the already tenuous dichotomy between agrarianism and non-agrarianism while suggesting that interpersonal and economic connections constitute freedom.

Through this analysis of the prison, I make explicit what was implicit in the other case studies. UA relies on increasing connections between people as connections to land decrease. By forming these interpersonal connections, working not on monolithic blocks of land but the fragmented human landscape, urban agriculturalists create and join networks. In these networks, moral and economic connections are inseparable. A solely moral UA system would lack the capital necessary to implement itself, while a solely economic system would lack the rationale. Morality and economy, though seen as opposing in a traditional understanding of agrarianism, are mutually enabling in the case of Madurai's UA.

In integrating themselves with this moral-economic web, urban farmers create opportunities, which Sen argues constitute freedom (17). Integration with the moral-economic network, however, presupposes integration with the environmental network. Without material resources, there could be no market, no ideologies and no people; there would literally be nothing. Thus, while Sen argues that the expansion of personal freedoms “allows us to be fuller social persons, exercising our own volitions and interacting with – and influencing – the world in which we live” (15), some of my subjects go a step further, asserting freedom not just in their “social” personhood but in the environmental personhood that underlies it. They understand themselves as part of the environment, gaining what Thompson calls “a sense of harmony and integration” through morally grounded agricultural and economic activities.

In a circuitous way, we here return to the foundationally agrarian tenet that pervades moral, economic, and all other systems – one cannot remove a person, nor her thoughts and practices, from the environment. To accept this, and find agency in interconnectedness, is to be free. The connections upon connections through which people, goods and ideas flow thus

coalesce into a liberating natural monism that will be important to keep in mind as development proceeds:

“I feel about nature...I am nature.”



**Figure 1.** Flooded rice paddy and coconut grove outside of Madurai. Photo by author.

# HOME GARDEN PACK

## Mini Combo - 5 (Learner)

Rs 1999/-

The advertisement features a collage of gardening supplies. At the top, a green corrugated tarpauline is displayed. Below it, several white grow bags containing green seedlings are arranged. A red starburst graphic in the upper left corner indicates a price of Rs 1999/-. To the right, a bag of Levington Organic Blend potting mixture is shown. In the foreground, there are blue rectangular planters (one labeled 1.5x1.5 ft) filled with green herbs, an orange watering can with the 'egarden' logo, and a red bag of Nu-Erth Premium Potting Mix. The 'egarden' logo is prominently displayed at the bottom right, with the tagline 'Plant Green . Live Clean'.

**Content**

1. Grow bag-10
2. Green bag-3
3. Shade net-5x5-1
4. Tarpauline- 5x5-1
5. Potting mixture
6. Watering can
7. Seedling
8. Seed tray
9. Manure

Figure 2. Advertisement for home garden kit. Image from <https://www.facebook.com/egardenmadurai/>.



**Figure 3.** Juana's greenhouse. Photo by author.

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