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‘Red sanders mafia’ in South India: violence, electoral democracy and labour

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David Picherit

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'Red sanders mafia' in South India: violence, electoral democracy and labour

David Picherit

This chapter offers insights into the material assemblage of red sanders smuggling, extending to its recruitment and labour processes and the role of electoral democracy in determining hierarchies and structures of power. By following a number of smugglers/politicians' career trajectories, it explores how electoral politics and the red sanders mafia are entangled in relations of intreccio. It also reveals how the regulation of red sanders smuggling is deeply entrenched in the economic, cultural and political history of Rayalaseema. The latter is further illustrated by the ways the mythical figure of Veerappan is used to negotiate labour, violence and justice in the region.

Background

The 2014 parliamentary elections in the state of Andhra Pradesh (South India) were preceded and followed by a series of reported murders in the Seshachalam forest in the region of Rayalaseema. Six months before the election dates, nine woodcutters were found dead along with two forest officials, whose genitals had been cut off. Seshachalam forest is the only place in the world where a particular species of sandalwood, known as red sanders, grows. This wood was listed as endangered in 1995 and protected by international conventions in 1998.¹ From the early 2000s onward, local and small-scale red sanders smuggling has become globalised traffic. Importantly, it has become a major source of political funding in the region. Highly valued on international markets, red sanders are cut, moved by sea, air and roads, and sold to global destinations, China in

particular. A year after the 2014 parliamentary election, the Red Sanders Anti-Smuggling Task Force (RSASTF) – implemented by the new Chief Minister, Chandrababu Naidu (from the Telugu Desam Party) – killed 20 woodcutters. According to police sources, ‘smugglers linked to Veerappan’ – the iconic South Indian sandalwood and ivory smuggler killed by police 10 years ago – were killed in an ‘encounter’.² A number of investigations led by a Special Investigation Team (SIT) from human rights organisations (such as the National Campaign for De-notified Tribes’ Human Rights (NCDNTHR)), however, came up with a different account. Their report describes the labourers as ‘poor’ and ‘passive victims’ and shows that the task force killed ‘20 poor migrant tribal woodcutters brought by middlemen from the neighbouring state of Tamil Nadu’.³ Other media suggest instances of torture (Janardhanan 2015). The killings were followed by a wave of arrests of the alleged smugglers between 2015 and 2016. More than 7,000 people were arrested but the conviction rate was only 1 per cent in 2017 (Umashanker 2017). Significantly, three days after the mass killing, the Chief Minister argued for lifting the ban on selling red sanders and removing it from the international list of endangered wood (Vadlapatla 2015). His plan was to allow the state to sell red sanders at global auctions in order to finance his populist promises to farmers, and to improve the finances of the new state of Andhra Pradesh after its bifurcation from Telangana.⁴ These two subsequent events indicate how political control over state violence and market regulation are central to the structuring and making of the red sanders illegal international trade.

Changing laws and altering regulations, defining and re-defining what is legal and what is illegal in the sandalwood business, is a process dating back to the colonial times (Raj 2014). A major step in such reconfigurations was the 1998 decision to ban the red sanders trade. What was initially designed as a law to control deforestation contributed instead to creating a burgeoning illegal trade fostered by high international demand for red sanders. For Rayalaseema’s politicians-cum-business executives this new source of profit quickly became the new El Dorado: a source of criminal capital to be used to finance electoral politics as well as to make personal fortunes. It follows that by the mid-2000s, the struggles to control (and run) the business politically started to become very heated and violent. By then all the logistic operations related to the traffic – from the cutting of the wood to its transportation to major ports in Chennai, Calcutta, Kochi and Mumbai and then shipment abroad – required the pro-active intervention of Rayalaseema politicians and state agents, and a level of impunity that could be achieved only by an electoral victory. The concept of ‘mafia’, defined as the product of the encounter between profitable violent criminal activities and politics (see the Introduction to this

volume), captures the entanglement (*intreccio*) of electoral politics and the criminal economy that I will go on to describe in this chapter,⁵ specifically the local red sanders mafia developed by building upon vernacular forms of democracy (Michelutti 2008) and the structure of the informal/illegal economies that are typical of the region. Far from being identical across the world, informal/illegal economies reflect assemblages of local cultural, political and social elements. More specifically the development of the red sanders mafia is the product of the transformation of deeply entrenched cultures of political factionalism and related ideas and practices of leadership, as I will explore below. In addition, the importance of the socio-cultural context in shaping the international traffic in local red sanders is further illustrated by the mobilisation of the Veerappan myth. Veerappan was a sandalwood smuggler who allegedly killed 120 police officers and kidnapped famous cinema megastars. He was murdered by a Special Task Force in 2004. For the police he was a criminal, while parts of the local tribal population viewed him as a ‘social bandit’. Veerappan used to control entire forests on the Tamil Nadu and the Karnataka borders, thanks to police and political protection. While his fame flourishes across India and beyond, through cartoons, movies and even global commercial branding, he carries on shaping the representations (and workings) of regional criminal political economies. Throughout this chapter I will pay particular attention to the social and political mobilisation of this mythological figure and the ways it is currently deployed by the police to criminalise labourers and justify their killings. This, together with an exploration of the careers of key violent criminal figures currently involved in the red sanders mafia, will offer insights into the material organisation of the red sanders smuggling organisation, recruitment processes and the role of electoral democracy in determining internal hierarchies and structures of power. This paper relies on ethnographic fieldwork on criminal politics and businesses conducted in the district of Chittoor between 2012 and 2017. It combines methods like participant observation, informal and formal interviews and secondary sources like media and NGO reports.

The emergence of the red sanders mafia

The history of Rayalaseema, and its representations in the media, movies and music, is characterised by a focus on the violent struggles between faction leaders. From the *paregallu* (‘the ones who rule’) who emerged after the fall of the Vijayanagara Empire in the sixteenth century and

maintained their dominance by keeping their own armies, to the contemporary democratic faction politics, Rayalaseema has been mainly studied through a political lens (Subrahmanyam 1986). The recent political history of Andhra Pradesh is shaped by the opposition between two landowning castes: the Reddys, portrayed as a caste of politicians, and the Kammas, a caste of business people. Both castes benefitted from the agrarian reforms in the 1960s and used it to reinforce their political and economic dominance in Rayalaseema. They were also able to diversify their activities and branch out into the arms industry, the construction sector, the illegal alcohol trade and the management of petrol pumps, the latter being seen as a cash cow. While the Reddys could rely on their domination over the Congress party to control state resources, the Kammas contested their political power by joining the Communist party and then by launching their own caste-based political vehicle, the Telugu Desam party (TDP), in 1982. Success was immediate: they won the state elections in 1983. Since then, the two political parties (Congress and TDP) have alternated in government (Prasad 2015). The regional political landscape changed after the death in 2009 of the Congress Chief Minister, the charismatic leader Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy (known as YSR). His son, Jagan Mohan Reddy, allegedly one of the most corrupt Indian politicians and a famous figure in the criminalisation of Indian politics (Still 2018; Vaishnav 2017),⁶ then launched his own political party, the YSR Congress party. In the 1990s, this criminalisation was also made visible by the emergence of violent politician-businessmen from the Kamma and Reddy communities who partially challenged political dynasties. Murders, kidnapping and rackets were tools used to climb the political ladder and make huge profits in sectors such as mines, quarries and forests. Elected as MLAs, they could exercise control over state resources, transfer bureaucrats, command local police forces and use licensed and unlicensed violence against opponents. Political violence was routinised. It is said to have led to 1,800 deaths over the past two decades. But Reddy and Kamma faction leaders are not only a provincial story. It should be noted that nine of the twelve Chief Ministers of the former (and united) state of Andhra Pradesh came from Rayalaseema (Picherit 2018).

Accounts of Rayalaseema political history have often neglected the economic aspects of faction politics. This illustration of the development of the red sanders mafia will highlight the role of the economy in shaping political violence and electoral politics in this part of the world. While small criminals – loosely related to political parties or the Maoist guerrilla – entered into the red sanders business at the end of the 1990s, the real big business developed after the election of YSR as Chief Minister in

2004. Nevertheless, it is his son Jagan, known for the fortune he made during his father's term, who has often been credited for scaling up the red sanders traffic. After YSR's death, Jagan lost the parliamentary elections with his new political party; his political opponents, Kiran Kumar Reddy (Congress party) and his brother Kishore Reddy, became major actors in the red sanders traffic. Controlling the red sanders business guarantees funding not only for henchmen, party workers and for political campaigns but also for private accumulation. Indeed, as I will detail, many of the conflicts that from the outside may be seen to be moved by 'politics' were actually closely related to the red sanders economy. All the politicians I have mentioned so far have their constituencies in the vicinity of the Seshachalam forest.⁷ The forest's spatial and political proximity to these figures could partly explain the silence and fear surrounding the red sanders business in the district of Chittoor, in stark contrast with the ways political violence is usually routinely and openly discussed. Most of my informants attempted to discourage any research: 'The brother of Kiran Kumar Reddy [ex-CM of Congress party] is involved. The brother of the CM! He lives 50 kilometres away. Nobody will dare doing something. This is too dangerous.' Another stated, 'Nobody will talk about red sanders. This is power, everybody fears them.' Another party worker mentioned, 'You should stop asking questions. The son and the brother of the two last Chief Ministers were involved. Now it is the turn of Chandrababu Naidu [leader of the TDP]', one warned me. 'No one can make a direct link between red sanders' criminals and politicians: they use their party workers, their henchmen but they never involve directly.'

Smugglers' careers

I will now start to unravel the linkages between politicians and the red sanders business by exploring a number of smugglers/politicians' career trajectories, beginning with Kollam Gangi Reddy.

Kollam Gangi Reddy, a.k.a the Junior Veerappan

The role of electoral politics in shaping the red sanders mafia became clear a few days after the 2014 election results, when Kollam Gangi Reddy (KGR), a major player in red sanders traffic, had to escape to Dubai, Singapore and then Mauritius. The 2014 elections sanctioned the victory of Chandrababu Naidu – one of KGR's public enemies. The criminal career

of KGR dovetails with the history of red sanders smuggling and faction politics, and is similar to the biographical trajectories of many other political figures in the region. He was born in a village in the Kadapa district of Rayalaseema, a few kilometres away from YSR and Jagan Mohan Reddy. KGR began his career as a muscleman. His violent reputation was cemented in 1987 when he led a violent campaign in support of his brother's candidacy in the Mandal *panchayat* elections. Two years later, he attacked some of his rivals using homemade bombs. He allegedly murdered an industrialist in 1992. He escaped a life sentence in 1999 and thereafter dedicated himself to extortion and illegal alcohol production and trade.⁸ At the same time he joined the Naxalite guerrilla and entered 'clandestine life' in the forest. According to various sources it was during this period that he became involved in smuggling. At that time he started a partnership with Sahul Hameed, who is allegedly one of the international bosses of the business today, as I will explore below. KGR became famous at the national level when he was accused of taking part in a bomb attack against the then Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu in Tirupati on 1 October 2003.⁹ This attack was allegedly funded by red sanders smugglers. Acquitted, KGR had gained a reputation for being a fearless 'specialist' in violence.

It was around 2004 that KGR moved his line of work from 'political violence' to 'economic crime' by becoming a major actor in the red sanders mafia. Various media reports portray KGR as the master of the transnational transportation of red sanders, crediting him for introducing innovative smuggling methods and opening up new sea and terrestrial routes (*Times of India* 2015a). The red sanders business made him a billionaire (Rangarajan and Venkat Sandeep 2015). He also became the owner of a barite mine in Mangampeta, a region of Kadapa where YSR, Chief Minister between 2004 and 2009, has illegally provided his supporters with mining authorisations. He also owns land and a variety of estates in the Rayalaseema region (Subramanyam 2015). It should be noted that politics has been central to KGR's rise. Close to the Congress party, he greatly benefitted from the protection of YSR and then of Jagan Mohan Reddy, who carried on protecting the business after the death of his father. K. Gangi Reddy managed to secure his position when a former follower of YSR, Kiran Kumar Reddy, became the new Chief Minister in 2012. Despite the competition between Jagan Mohan Reddy (YSR Congress party) and Kiran Kumar Reddy (Congress party), one could suggest that there was an agreement to maintain the red sanders business in the hands of the Reddys, as a caste.

The position of KGR became insecure during the 2014 electoral campaign, when he was nicknamed the 'Junior Veerappan' by the Kamma candidate, Chandradabu Naidu. The first serious threat materialised when police officers arrested him after the seizure of 2,000 red sanders logs (worth INR 5 crore) in Rayalaseema on 5 April 2014 – one month before the elections (Umashanker 2015). He was granted bail by the high court on 16 May 2014 and escaped to Mauritius with a fake passport. Just a few days after his election, Chandrababu Naidu wrote a letter to the governor to urge him to arrest KGR. This enmity was probably related to the 2003 bomb attack. On 24 February 2015, KGR was arrested in Mauritius and extradited to India. His arrest brought to light the entangled complicities of state officials and politicians in the red sanders business. According to the Andhra Pradesh police investigations, several Rayalaseema police inspectors and deputy superintendents had been bribed with money, gifts and villas in exchange for impunity. In short, the rise and fall of Kollam Gangi Reddy shows the trajectory of a criminal career that started by offering 'muscle' in the context of violent faction politics and then gradually shifted to the running of an illegal global trade. His biography illustrates how criminals do not necessarily enter directly into politics by contesting elections but rather often rely on the protection of politicians to carry on their illegal activities.

Peddireddy Ramachandra Reddy: from contractor to minister/
smuggler

KGR's career trajectory is not the only path to red sanders smuggling. Unlike KGR, Peddireddy Ramachandra Reddy (PRR) was a small contractor directly involved in politics. For a long time, getting access to public contracts has been a successful route to financial accumulation and entering politics in this part of the world. Many regional politicians started their careers as small contractors in the construction, mines and alcohol sectors. An exploration of PRR's 'contractor' career shows that it is very difficult to distinguish between business and politics – the two activities are fused together. After starting his career by contracting illegal alcohol, in the late 1970s he became a civil contractor for irrigation projects. In 1978, he contested the MLA state elections in Pileru constituency, located close to the Seshachalam forest. He lost the elections but by contesting them he consolidated his name and reputation on the local political/business map.¹⁰ In 1989, he again contested and finally won the elections. His new political position allowed him to further expand his subcontracting activities to road construction, railways and then mining, mostly granite. Despite

another defeat in 1994, his company, PLR Projects, continued to grow, and became a major asset for his subsequent electoral victories in 1999 and 2004 in the Pileru constituency. However, this source of funding was not enough to maintain his elected post in the long run. In 2009, following the merging of two constituencies, the ticket for Pileru was given to his local Congress party enemy, Kiran Kumar Reddy. Kiran Kumar Reddy's family is extremely influential locally. His father was a minister in P.V. Narasimha Rao's cabinet between 1971 and 1973. PRR had then to move to Punganur – 50 kilometres away – to be elected again as MLA in 2009. Eventually he managed to become Minister of Forests and Environment in 2010. It is common knowledge that this is the perfect political position to exploit forests resources and 'make money'. As the Minister of Forests and Environment he expanded his red sanders smuggling activities by offering protection. This phase of his career was brief, however. The then Chief Minister resigned, and his enemy Kiran Kumar Reddy was elected in 2012. As a consequence, Kiran Kumar Reddy's brother, N. Kishore Kumar Reddy, emerged as the new leader of the red sanders business. It is at this point that PRR left the Congress party to join Jagan Mohan Reddy and the YSR Congress party. The transition was not peaceful. The struggle between N. Kishore Kumar Reddy and PRR started in 2011 and spilled into a series of non-investigated murders in the Seshachalam forest. The murders were related to red sanders activities. Varaadi, a Tamil close to Kishore Kumar Reddy, was allegedly killed by forest officers who were allegedly controlled by PRR at the time. This murder was followed by the killings of two woodcutters (also Tamil) in December 2012. These murders were allegedly carried out to stop red sanders resources falling into the hands of PRR.¹¹ The use of legitimate state force to regulate faction politics and criminal economies is not new in Rayalaseema. The CM, Kiran Kumar Reddy, in June 2013 replied to the murders by implementing a task force, which killed another labourer in 29 January 2014.

Exploring the life of PRR unveils the importance of local politics in the organisation of the red sanders mafia. What we witness is the use of licensed and unlicensed violence and related political electoral manoeuvres between the Congress party (Kiran Kumar Reddy) and YSR Congress party (Jagan Mohan Reddy). The situation changed after the 2014 elections with the victory of Chandrababu Naidu and the TDP. PRR, whose assets rose from 4 to 63 *crore* between 2009 and 2014¹², won the YSR Congress party seat in his constituency. He also helped other local MLAs to be elected, like in Madanapalle where I met him, and aided his own son to become a member of parliament (YSR Congress party). However, PRR is now isolated. His second term in the opposition party reduces his

influence, and various informants told me that many of his henchmen and followers involved in red sanders traffic have now joined the TDP. This shift is explained by the number of arrests of smugglers who are not affiliated to TDP. As Venkataiah, the henchman of a YSR Congress party leader, explained: 'P. Ramachandra Reddy is in the opposition and has no contracts anymore and no impunity. What to do? Going to jail or moving to TDP and continuing business?'

From small contractor to minister, PRR's career highlights the entanglement of business, politics and violence, as well as the importance of electoral democracy for controlling and governing the red sanders mafia. The two different careers I have so far presented highlight varieties of relations between politics and crime: Kollam Gangi Reddy is a criminal related to politics while Peddireddy Ramachandra Reddy is a criminal politician-businessman. Both depend, however, on electoral politics to survive in the business.

The red sanders mafia organisation

'Veerappan forest': labour force, migration, intermediaries and transport

How can tonnes of illegally cut red sanders be transported by road across India and then by air and/or by ship to China without being stopped? Answering this question will further shed light on the red sanders mafia organisation. So far, we have explored the linkages with politics and the red sanders business. In this section we move on to explore the deep continuities of the red sanders mafia with the Indian informal economy. Smuggling red sanders requires a sophisticated organisation. It involves traders and a variety of agents and labour contractors who are capable of monitoring the collection of wood. Once the wood is cut, it is hidden in safe places and then loaded into vans or trucks with fake registration. Police checkpoints need to be crossed during transportation to the ports, and port customs need also to be passed. Finally, for transportation via sea, ships need to be found and managed. Importantly all these operations require the *active* participation of police and custom officers. Smuggling red sanders requires political support and control, and bureaucrats committed to getting things done for the 'red sanders mafia' (Nemana 2015; NCDNTHR 2014).¹³ It requires woodcutters. The business relies heavily on male migrant labour from tribal and Dalit castes originating mostly (but not exclusively) from the Jawadi hills of the neighbouring

state of Tamil Nadu.¹⁴ These labourers are widely known to have the special skills needed to work with timber and are experienced working in difficult forest conditions. However, there are also other factors that explain the use of labourers from Tamil Nadu rather than local ones.¹⁵ Firstly local labourers tend not to get involved in the wood cutting business because they are aware of the dangers that working for the red sanders mafia involves. As a local NGO leader I met near the Seshachalam forest explained: 'Local labourers are aware of the consequences, the stakes and the tensions regarding red sanders smuggling. It has become a highly political issue and dangerous. Many local people refuse to work in the forest.' Secondly Dalit and tribal migrant labourers from Tamil Nadu are considered 'special'. They are viewed as fearless due to their alleged history of criminality and linkages with the famous Veerappan. It follows that labour contractors use the brand 'Veerappan forest' to promote the skills of their Tamil labourers and negotiate better wages for them. This branding, while being an advantage when negotiating labour wages, also facilitates criminalising migrants. The Veerappan myth has been used by the police to legitimise the killing of 'smugglers' who originate from 'areas previously controlled by the famous smuggler'. As of today, as I shall further explore in the next section, more than 2,000 Dalit and tribal labour migrant woodcutters from Tamil Nadu have been jailed (Janyala 2018).

Going back to the red sanders mafia organisation, labour contractors are in charge of organising shelter, food and water in the hamlets and villages in the Seshachalam forest, and manage the working schedules. The labourers cut the trees, then carry and hide the logs in the local ravines. Most labourers are paid by weight (between INR 20 to INR 40 per kg). They are paid when they return to Tamil Nadu. In the Seshachalam forest labourers are extremely isolated from the surrounding areas. In Chandragiri, a small town close to the forest, one activist mentioned: 'We never see them, we never meet them. They come at night and stay isolated in the forest.' The invisibility of migrant labourers is common in India; however, in the case of the red sanders mafia it is even more pronounced due to the illegal dimension of their activities.

The red sanders criminal economy is similar in many ways to how the Indian construction sector is organised (Picherit 2009). The isolation of labourers, the existence of multiple middlemen, the inter-state character of the labours, and the ways their payment is delayed until they are back in their villages of origin are not unique features of the red sanders sector. Similar to the case of the construction business, the recruitment of migrant labourers by labour intermediaries has a major advantage:

labourers know who their liaison is and respond only to his authority, but they often have no idea about who their real employer is. This structure is even more critical in the red sanders criminal economy, where there is an extra need to impede the circulation of information and prevent single individuals from having a clear view of the different layers of the mafia organisation. This model is very useful because it prevents anyone from giving information to the police. This is particularly important in the transportation phase of the business. Transportation requires major logistics and the organisation of drivers, 4x4s and lorries, impunity at forest check posts and police check posts. It requires good quality and updated intelligence. Members of the organisation need to be directly connected to the officers who are in charge of monitoring transport to major Indian ports, such as Chennai, Calcutta, Mumbai or Kochi. Sources from human rights organisations and/or the police have documented some of these organisational aspects. For example, once the wood is loaded a first pilot on a motorcycle drives ahead to check that there are no police and forest patrols along the way and keeps the truck driver informed by mobile phone. In case of problems, another car with an agent is always ready to intervene with money and bribe police or forest guards if necessary. 'One fellow spends INR 5 *lakh* to give it to the next fellow, who spends another INR 5 *lakh* until the next stage, and so on so a lot of money trickles down,' declared the Chief Forest Officer in the Seshachalam forest in the local media. 'They're so organised that the drivers don't know the identities of who they're working with. So even if we catch them we can't get to the other links in the chain.' (Nemana 2015).

Transnational smugglers

There is a lack of substantial information about the international dimension of the business and its linkages with local politics in Rayalaseema. Discussions with informants reveal more about the fabric of rumours, fantasy and fictions of power than factual knowledge of the transnational organisation. There is also a huge gap between the very detailed and pervasive analysis of how the red sanders business is embedded in Rayalaseema politics postulated by journalists who are not silenced by the landscape of violent and criminal political economies and the contradictory and spectacular news about the global dimension of the business.¹⁶ It is known from police investigations that before reaching their final destination, red sanders logs are stored in *godowns* or in farmhouses near major ports (M.K. Kumar 2014). The entire operation relies on the

complicity of police and customs agents who facilitate the smuggling by affixing government seals to containers, thereby making them 'legal'.¹⁷ Smugglers are then said to register the containers – with fake information about the product to be exported – and have the final seal approved by the Customs and Central Excise Department. The containers are then taken to the *godowns*. In one case near Pune, on the road to Mumbai port, it was reported that once the containers were marked with customs seals, smugglers opened and loaded them with the red sanders. They then sent the wood back to Jawaharlal Nehru Port Trust in Mumbai and got clearance to export their produce on cargo ships as 'agricultural products' (or plywood, rubber mats or other material in other cases).¹⁸ Even should the police manage to seize the smuggled wood, negotiation remains possible. Twenty tonnes of red sandalwood worth INR 3 *crore* were seized by the Local Crime Branch (LCB) Officer of the Pune rural police, but instead of arresting the smugglers, police officers allegedly demanded INR 1 *crore* from the smugglers (Kulkarni 2013).

According to environmental NGOs such as TRAFFIC, the smuggling of red sanders is part of a wider illegal trade in sandalwood within India and also in Africa and Australia (International Animal Rescue Foundation 2013). Those organisations tend to insist less on the everyday working of the trade than on the 'spectacular' elements and believe that red sanders smugglers use techniques deployed in the illegal drug trade, like painstakingly strapping a small container loaded with red sanders to the underside of a ship. These methods involve constant adjusting to ever-changing regulations, routes and new business opportunities, such as the recent implementation of Special Economic Zones (SEZ) in the area. The SEZ in Kochi exemplifies the possibilities offered by later forms of capitalism to the local criminal economy. As mentioned in the official website of the SEZ, 'The Cochin [Kochi] SEZ is a foreign territory in India. Legally, it stands outside the customs territory of India. This positioning permits both fast project approvals in the SEZ as well as a hassle-free environment for running units in the SEZ.'¹⁹ Yet the directorate of revenue intelligence (DRI) complains that the work of the police in this SEZ is seriously hampered by this legislation. In these 'zones' smugglers can practise their illegal operations without being harassed. The rare seizures of containers illegally shipped from the port to various parts of China look like police operations mainly performed for the media. In addition, arrests seem to have a limited deterrent effect. There is no confiscation of the assets of smugglers and smuggling is

not a non-bailable offence (see Kollam Gangi Reddy, mentioned previously) (Reddy 2014b).

Police investigations highlight some of the profiles of smugglers at international levels and the ways they play with borders and roads, drawing new maps across and within the interstices of official ones. Shahul Hameed is one of these big traffickers. He is said to have taken the lead in the business after A.T. Maideen, a gang leader who smuggled out red sanders to China and Hong Kong via Dubai, was arrested (Reddy 2014a). But not much is known about Shahul Hameed. A Singaporean citizen, he used to operate from Chennai, where he was arrested in 2004 by customs officials. However, when released on bail, he escaped and started to operate from Dubai. In 2011, the DRI seized his red sanders containers in Kochi port. Hameed is also believed to fund Kollam Gangi Reddy's career. Hameed's name featured in the press in May 2015 when 100 smugglers from Tamil Nadu and AP flew to the UAE to attend his daughter's wedding, even though the Chittoor and Tirupati police tried to stop them at the airport (Reddy 2015).

Despite the limited information, a number of crucial dimensions of the workings of red sanders international trafficking can be extrapolated. The first is the changing scale of the business in Rayalaseema and a shift from faction politics to regional criminal economies to transnational crime. The second point relates to the organisation of the business: the red sanders mafia necessarily builds on a strong state able to guarantee the circulation of trucks, the shipping of the wood logs and the control of the customs. State agents are omnipresent in the trade, implying the need to have politicians in key positions who are able to control and command bureaucrats and ensure the smooth collection and transportation of the red sanders.

The ghost of Veerappan and the criminalisation of labour

A striking point of the red sanders mafia is how a dead smuggler like Veerappan haunts and pervades the representations and practices of this criminal economy, from labour organisation and police investigation to public opinion. As Moffat argues (2018, 180), some dead 'appear as active interlocutors in ongoing political struggles' and have important potential in contemporary politics. Veerappan is a powerful element in the local cultural repertoire of models of authority. A Robin Hood figure (Seal 2009) and protector of forests for some, the figure of Veerappan in South India epitomises the dangerous criminal for the state and the police forces. In doing so it also contributes to legitimising the criminalisation

of labourers and the use of state violence against labour in the context of the red sanders criminal economy. Therefore, Veerappan is mobilised by various actors involved in the business in a variety of ways – as an asset, as proof of guilt or innocence.

But the career of Veerappan also mirrors the changing alliance between politics, markets and violence in later forms of capitalism. These dynamics can be seen in two events in April 2015: the massacre of 20 labourers by the Red Sanders Anti-Smuggling Task Force, followed by the decision to remove red sanders from the endangered list to make the business easier (Vadlapatla 2015). As early as July 2014, the Andhra Pradesh government was ready to sell red sanders at auction through global tenders (*Economic Times* 2014). In October and November 2014, the government prepared the first phase of the e-auctions of 4,000 tonnes (seized by police) to be sold at an average of INR 25 lakh per tonne. The change of rules in the business cannot be dissociated from the massacre of woodcutters. It is the combination of the private use of state violence with the manipulation of market regulations that unravels how electoral democracy is crucial in determining who is ruling and controlling the business. What we are witnessing from 2014 elections is not the end of smuggling but rather the emergence of a new leadership: the TDP (and the Kammas) have now entered the market. By changing the law, Naidu has stopped a solid source of finance for his own political opponents from the Congress party.

Smugglers vs. labourers

The categorisation of woodcutters as ‘smugglers’ has serious implications and Veerappan is the point of reference through which a variety of actors (from police to NGOs) seem to interpret, compare and evaluate red sanders labourers. The ‘fact-finding report’ drafted and released in 2014 by the National Campaign for De-notified Tribes’ Human Rights (NCDN-THR) highlights the conditions of workers, the roles of the Kammas and the Reddys in the organisation of the smuggling activities, and the ways labourers have been killed and jailed by the government.²⁰ The attention paid to labour derives from the fact that woodcutters are the only ones killed and/or jailed in the red sanders economy: ‘About two thousand Tamilians are in Andhra jails because of the cases booked against them for red sanders smuggling’, according to a lawyer from Kadapa.²¹ He traces the history of the recruitment of the labour force and explains that the majority of the Tamilian coolies originate from areas surrounding the Jawadi hills, between Vellore and Tiruvannamalai districts (bordering

Chittoor district of Andhra Pradesh). He links their recruitment to the death of Veerappan: 'These villages were once under the influence of notorious red sanders smuggler Veerappan. After the death of Veerappan, the poor people who used to work for him were rendered jobless. This provided an opportunity for the Andhra smugglers to recruit them easily at cheap wages.'

The NCDNTHR's narrative stresses historical continuities with Veerappan – despite the fact that Veerappan was not active in this part of Tamil Nadu. If the report does not support Veerappan, in other articles, tribal and Dalit Tamil woodcutters are, condescendingly, portrayed as poor, passive and ignorant tribal victims of a traffic organised by upper-caste Andhra politicians (Narasimhan 2014). In this narrative they are exploited because of their tribal identity and they are killed and jailed because they are Tamil:

Those killed are only coolies engaged by contractors to cut trees at night under the cover of darkness. They are not smugglers. Young tribal men from Jawadi hills in Tiruvannamalai district of Tamil Nadu are lured by brokers with offer of fancy wages and pressed into extracting red sanders from the forests. (Rajappa 2015)

As mentioned above, the mafia can rely on the participation of labourers who do not know who's who in the trade. Such lack of knowledge helps to protect the organisation. Human rights organisations contest the criminalisation and the mass killings of labourers by the state by emphasising this aspect. By contrast police forces argue that labourers are active 'mafia' workers coming from villages historically under the influence of Veerappan: 'Top police officials based in Rayalaseema said that labour gangs employed by Veerappan to chop down sandalwood trees in the Satyamangalam forests are taking part in the red sanders smuggling in Seshachalam forests,' states one source (*Deccan Herald* 2014). Police portray them as active smugglers and rational followers of Veerappan and insist on their deep, historical and undercover engagement with him. As a police officer said: 'These woodcutters are experts and after death of Veerappan in 2004 they were silent for few years. For the past five years they are coming to Andhra Pradesh and cutting the red sanders heavily.' This police perspective turns woodcutters into smugglers. Their geographical origin, their skills in woodcutting and their abilities to remain silent after Veerappan's death are elements 'top' police officials attempt to link to each other: labourers are smugglers and mafia members. This view is reinforced by the alleged structural similarities of the methods of

red sanders smugglers to those employed by the late Veerappan. Another top police official said: 'The supply chains, the intermediaries and the other methods used are exactly the same as with Veerappan. Most of the gangs are from Tamil Nadu and are intruding into AP. The issue is of serious concern as the smugglers are turning violent' (Raghavan 2013). Whether as passive victims, followers or active smugglers, labourers are blamed for their alleged links with Veerappan, who continues to haunt red sanders smuggling over activities a decade after his death.

Mass killing of labourers

The Veerappan 'brand' came into force in public media when two forest officials were killed in the forest on 15 December 2013.²² Local newspapers announced 'Veerappan-style smugglers attack Tirumala rangers, 2 officers stoned to death' (Raghavan 2013). Other newspapers reported that the officials were stoned and hanged to death; others asserted that their genitals were cut off. Ultimately, woodcutters were portrayed as savage and brutal. However, the association between smugglers and Veerappan was popularly viewed with suspicion. 'Will they go unarmed in the forest on their own, without any orders? They are not stupid,' stated an informant. Others declared the necessary involvement of politics: 'This is faction politics, elections are coming. Nothing to do with labour or forest officials.'

The representations of the state, democracy and politics among the local population often converge around a central position: it is impossible to imagine the state and the police forces acting without political intervention. Bosses do give orders and the killings of tree cutters are necessarily related to power relations. As one bureaucrat stressed: 'Forest officials do not go in the forest on their own; they knew electoral campaigning was coming.' These narratives highlight the interpretations of killings in terms of faction politics and echo official reports: 'We suspect these two officials were not killed by the tree cutters and this is a handy work of the corrupt forest and police officials, in connivance with key smugglers and political bosses' (Raghavan 2013).

The visible criminalisation and killings of woodcutters contrast with the limited and less publicised investigations on the relations between smugglers and politicians. As mentioned, most of the top smugglers who have been charged were able to secure bail and escape. Those who are in jail still benefit from political support and receive visits from YSR Congress leaders like Midhun Reddy, member of parliament and son of Peddireddy Ramachandra Reddy. The mass killing of labourers had a

huge impact on the media (Nichenametla 2015). Police stated that the RSASTF had spotted a gang of 100 woodcutters from Tamil Nadu on the night of 6/7 April. When challenged, 20 of the woodcutters threw stones at them. The task force responded by shooting the 20 dead (Fact Finding Team 2015). Another report argues ironically about the unreality of the police version: 'Kantha Rao's men deserve President's police medal for the accuracy they have shown in identifying the 20 stone-throwing woodcutters out of 100 in the dead of night without any night vision equipment.' (Rajappa, 2015). RSASTF is also silent on what happened to the other 80 in the gang.

The use of licensed violence and state forces has long been a privilege of bosses and a major way of redefining the business map. What is striking is that this task force has worked as a private army for Naidu. Like paramilitary forces, they have full impunity and attacked only non-TDP smugglers. Whatever the involvement of the leader, this conveyed a strong warning to YSRCP and Congress bosses involved in smuggling activities. Men like Peddireddy Ramchandra Reddy have a reputation that reaches far into villages and towns. They inspire fear and respect. A henchman said: 'If you meet him, you should never turn your back and eat in his house. If something goes wrong, you will get poisoned. Everybody fears him.' With the rise to power of Chandrababu Naidu and his uses of the task force, the fear has changed direction: 'Even Peddireddy Ramchandra Reddy is scared now.' The denial of any rights, the disposal of the labour force and bodies and the complete lack of protection are the crude extension of informal economies (Shah et al. 2017).

Conclusion

This chapter illustrates how current criminal economies, based on alliances between markets, politics, state and violence, have led to a criminalisation of labour and a marked shift from political violence to economic violence in Andhra Pradesh, South India. The history of red sanders traffic highlights the transformation of the local sandalwood economy into a criminal, international mafia-like activity. I showed the crucial role of electoral democracy (and criminalisation of politics and politicisation of crime) in shaping the governance of the red sanders mafia and also stressed how its regulation is deeply entrenched in the economic, cultural and political history of Rayalaseema. The latter is further illustrated by the ways the mythical figure of Veerappan is used to negotiate labour, violence and justice in the region. Local criminal

economies are further entrenched in the local socio-political contexts through the logics of intermediation typical of the local informal economy. Such dynamics help to maintain the silence and secrecy necessary to protect the workings of the red sanders mafia. Lastly, I showed how the red sanders business is unstable and always dependent on electoral politics and changes in the laws. However, these uncertainties are also the basis for the making (or losing) of personal fortunes and for making the red sanders business a ‘gamble’ worth hundreds of *crores*.

Notes

1. Red sanders is protected under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) of Wild Fauna and Flora (1995) and has been listed as endangered by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) since 1998.
2. ‘Encounter’ reflects the licence delivered to police and army forces to kill unarmed civilians with impunity, notably alleged ‘Naxalites’ in Andhra Pradesh.
3. For the report see NCDNTHR 2014.
4. The state of Andhra Pradesh separated from the Telangana region in 2014.
5. See also P.S. Jha, quoted in the Introduction.
6. During his father’s term, his fortune rose from 10 *lakh* in 2004 to 72 *crore* in 2009, and to 400 *crore* in 2014 (Vaishnav 2017, 28).
7. The constituency of the ex-Chief Minister YSR and his son Jagan is located in Kadapa district, 100 kilometres from the Seshachalam forest; the constituency of the ex-Chief Minister, Kiran Kumar Reddy, and his brother Kishore is adjacent to the forest in Chittoor district. Chandrababu Naidu, the 2014 elected CM, is also based in Chittoor district.
8. To follow the details of the case, see *Indian Kanoon* (1999).
9. Chandrababu Naidu was Chief Minister between 1995 and 2004 and then from 2014 to the time of publication.
10. P. Ramachandra Reddy contested elections for the Janata party in 1978 and for the Congress party in 1985 and lost on both occasions.
11. For a detailed list of woodcutters killed see M.K. Kumar (2014) and NCDNTHR (2014).
12. For official details, see National Election Watch (n.d.).
13. See also Vadlapatla 2015.
14. A detailed report published in 2014 (M.K. Kumar 2014) states that ‘woodcutters come from Thiruvallur, Vellore, Krishnagiri, Thiruvannamalai, Kancheepuram, and Villupuram of Tamil Nadu and are supposedly brought by middlemen from Thiruvannamalai and Salem districts’. A detailed news report published in *Frontline* mentions they are mostly ‘Vanniyars and Malayali Scheduled Tribe hailed from the border districts of Salem, Dharmapuri, Krishnagiri, Tiruvannamalai and Vellore in Tamil Nadu’ (Rajasekaran 2015).
15. The characteristics of Indian informal labour markets are well known (Breman 1996; Hariss-White 2003; Basile and Hariss-White 2010), usually presenting strong segmentation by caste, class, gender and geographical origins. Often labour migration is used to reduce manpower costs and to avoid the application of labour laws. Generally economic sectors present multiple layers of intermediation and of subcontracting. Therefore, in this economy it is common to observe migrant labourers, often of a specific caste and/or region, brought by labour intermediaries to work sites.
16. The silence of the population about the red sanders mafia contrasts with the possibility for some journalists to cover and expose the red sanders mafia.
17. It remains unclear if they used duplicate seals or brought customs officials in to affix the seals.
18. According to media coverage, this information came to light during questioning of the customs clearance agent-turned-smuggler. The directorate of revenue intelligence (DRI) had earlier arrested him in 2010 for allegedly smuggling red sanders worth INR 5.03 *crore* to Dubai. He was released from jail in August last year.

19. See the official website at <http://www.csez.com/software/cedis.htm> (accessed 12 February 2018).
20. The committee was made up of advocates, tribal leaders and intellectuals from Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, convened to 'investigate the death and arrest of thousands of members of de-notified tribes from Tamil Nadu during the anti-smuggling operations by the police in Andhra Pradesh' (NCDNTHR 2014).
21. See also *Times of India* 2015b.
22. A few examples of press headlines: 'Veerappan Gone, But his Group Still Active in Seshachalam Forests' and 'It Bore Veerappan Mark'.

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