

Nilgiris: The hills are alive

Fascinating essays on the Blue Mountains

Sandip Ghose

When I shifted to Coonoor in the pristine Nilgiris post Covid, many would ask me — why Coonoor? I would reply — why not Coonoor, which would invariably draw a blank and move the conversation in another direction.

But, had I read this collection of essays on the Nilgiri Hills, compiled by Paul Hockings, before dropping anchor in the Blue Mountains, I would have stumped my interrogators with the answer “where else but the Nilgiris?”. As the editor writes in the blurb, the Nilgiris is one of the most heavily researched areas of India. But, it is still a well kept secret for the rest of the world. And, luckily so.

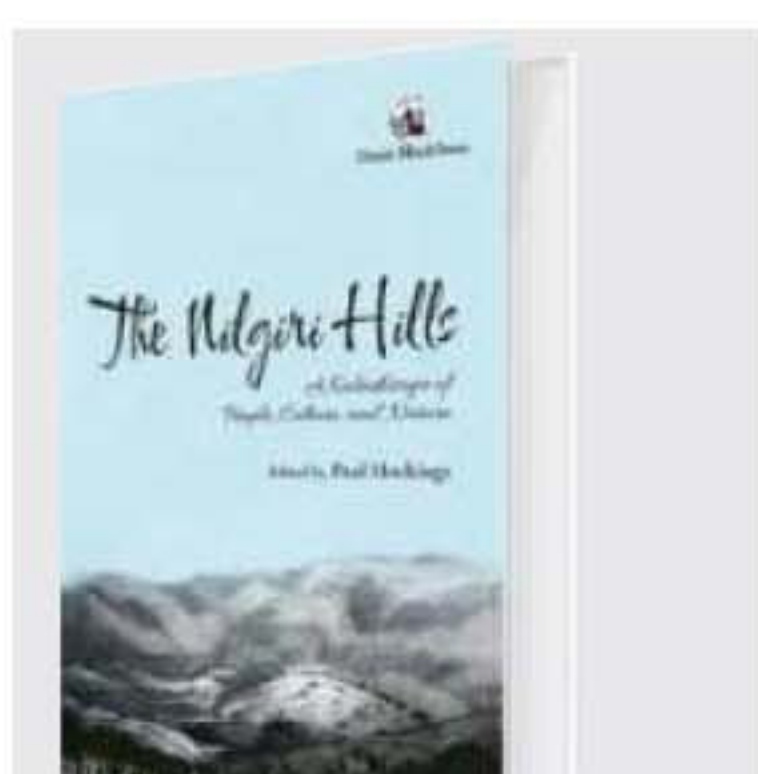
Though the district is spread over barely 1,000 square miles — it is a microcosm of climatological, ecological and cultural diversity. The editor has done well to capture its various facets in essays by an eclectic set of writers as diverse as filmmakers and musicologists. Each article gives a fascinating view of the region that is both esoteric and intimate without being pedantic.

The book begins with Hockings’ own account of the curious turn of events after the Fourth Anglo-Mysore War and the death of Tipu Sultan in the Battle of Seringapatam, in which the creation of the Nilgiris was a minor footnote but of immense socio-anthropological significance. From there emerged the histories of the indigenous tribes of the Nilgiris — the Todas, Kotas, Badagas, Kurumbas and Irulas.

The biodiversity and conservation challenges of the Nilgiris are much talked about. Similarly, the history of the tribes has been chronicled with academic rigour. But what makes for truly mesmerising reading is what Frank Heidemann calls “the social construct of the cultural landscape” built upon mythology and legends of the Badagas — a socio-geographic matrix of kinship and marital relationships, as it were.

AMBIVALENT MONEY

Obviously the advent of commercial tea cultivation was the pivot of socio-economic transformation of the region. But the Badagas have an ambivalent relationship with money — which one can appreciate only after living in the Nilgiris. While money is important it was never the sole pursuit in life. “No money



Title: The Nilgiri Hills: A Kaleidoscope of People, Culture, and Nature

Editor: Paul Hockings

Publisher: Orient Blackswan

Price: ₹975

prosper without relations’ and “without relations there is no money” — is the other side of the coin that Badagas grapple with. Thus there is a veiled contempt towards outsiders who come to the hills for commercial exploitation, especially land and real estate. Statements such as “in earlier times we did not know the value of money and (conversely) today we are running only after money” may sound anachronistic but are very much part of the Badaga psyche.

I was often amused by my botanist friend Nandu’s — a Badaga Royal — faith in traditional medicine. But a peek into the Irula and Alu Kurumba holistic health narratives gives me an idea of where he is coming from. What is surprising, however, is that such old heritage has still been preserved however tenuously even till this age. This is perhaps explained by the symbiotic culture that tries to marry myth with metaphor, idealism with pragmatism — as Indu K Mallah puts it so poetically in the concluding essay. She says the Nilgiris people are attuned to their environment and live by the credo of a reverent relationship with nature — the Devar Bettas (Divine Hills) and Devar Sholas (Divine Forests).

Call of duty has brought me away, temporarily I hope, from the Nilgiris. But this book has aroused my longing to return soon, as there is so much yet to learn and explore. I am already feeling pangs of guilt for not using the three consecutive years I spent there more productively, instead of relying solely on the auditory history of the region from my “Badu” buddies at the Coonoor Club Bar.

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