

A Montage of the Hills

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The Nilgiris are more than just a collage of people, hills, forests, meadows and wildlife; the mountainous range means many things to a diverse economy that exists not just in these mountains. People associated with the mountainous region are spread all over India and abroad. This is its predicament currently. The Nilgiris is the first United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization declared biosphere reserve in India. Being a region along the mountainous expanse of the Western Ghats, it is at a junction of three southern Indian states—Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Kerala. In all these three states, the mountains arise at their edges, rising into the skies shaded by clouds and a slightly dense atmosphere, earning its name—the blue mountains.

The Nilgiris is well known as a hill station and this image of being a picturesque place with a soothing climate and an imagined rural disposition is precisely what brought the huge population influx. John Sullivan, the pioneer from the erstwhile British administration, chose this to be a place for Europeans in India to use as a district headquarters and a sanatorium. These qualities of a space to recuperate and feel a sense of what they had left behind in Europe, have also led to the transformation of this once quiet and sparsely inhabited mountainous region into a bustling, peri-urban administrative region. Today, it is associated with traffic jams along its roads, water scarcities, pollution and so on; nearly all the ills that accompany economic drives to maximise and exploit a region for specific and not-so-common attributes available in its vicinity.

A Missing Mirror

Sixteen authors, who have engaged in years of research, studies and interactions with people amid this landscape,

BOOK REVIEWS

The Nilgiri Hills: A Kaleidoscope of People, Culture, and Nature edited by Paul Hockings, *Orient BlackSwan, 2023; pp 292, ₹975.*

contribute to this important literary volume. *The Nilgiri Hills: A Kaleidoscope of People, Culture, and Nature*, is edited by Paul Hockings, a well-known anthropologist and a contributor to the book as well. Eleven of these contributors have origins beyond India and are representative to some extent of the nature of information found in this book. Both the European and Indian lenses share perspectives largely about the indigenous tribal communities of the Nilgiris, though some of the information is from the work the authors have previously researched. It is a useful compendium of anthropological information from the Nilgiris, centred around a few of its indigenous communities. Anthropology in its various avatars is a multidisciplinary pursuit to comprehend people of different societies and cultures. The discipline, however, has moved far beyond its origins, leanings and biases over the last few decades but what remains central to its core tenets is a means to understand sociocultural and socioecological diversity, adaptation and change in humanity in diverse settings. These aspects, particularly adaptation and change, are missing pieces in the jigsaw of cultural diversity in the volume, and it is up to a newer generation of academics, journalists and writers to pick up these threads from what the contributors to this book have otherwise beautifully shared.

For centuries, many indigenous communities have been known to inhabit the Nilgiri mountains, among them particularly vulnerable communities as well, with a recent history of surviving as hunter-gatherers and others as agrarian

pastoralists. Categorised as “particularly vulnerable tribal groups (PVTG)” by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India, they continue to be small unique societies in the Nilgiris, and I would have hoped to read more about all these communities. The Toda, Badaga, Irula, Kurumba, Kota and other indigenous communities of these hills have been vulnerable to cultural and economic changes. Just a few of them feature more prominently in this volume as those systematically overwhelmed by the influx of colonial foreigners, and subsequently the deluge of people from the plains of Tamil Nadu and other parts of India. This is not stated explicitly in particular but is well known and evident; while angst and changes are documented, adaptations towards the evolution of present-day patterns of livelihood and economic adaptations are mostly missing from this volume.

However, this gap exists in much of the literature on various indigenous tribal communities in India, which needs to be accounted for as we write about *etic* and *emic* perspectives, to study communities who share a window into our human pasts, giving us a lens often missing in our chorus for sustainable livelihoods. As we move on from curiosity to sensitivity and acculturating ourselves with the other, it is better to map and write about the transformations such communities have experienced over the past many decades to add greater clarity to our conceptions of society.

As Andrew Wilford writes on healing and well-being, of transformations that took place with the growth of the cash economy and changes in indigenous belief systems that used to bridge and integrate a more egalitarian social order, the lack of intercultural comprehensibility widened and worsened. Bridging these gaps could be possible trajectories for the new work in this region. The world over, there is a slow but steady trend moving in this direction, of integrating rights-based obligations while actively comprehending issues of ecology and social justice, especially among marginalised indigenous tribal communities,

who safeguard and provide diversity to our sociocultural milieu.

On Reflection and Symmetry

The book is arranged into seven sections beginning with a good prologue by Hockings setting the stage and moves through two chapters on nature, a view from the outside of two communities—the Badaga and the Toda. Frank Heide-mann (Chapter 6) having worked amid the Badaga for decades provides perspective from the outside of the inside, while Anthony Walker (Chapter 4) dissects the institution of *Monegars* that was imposed on the members of the Toda community when they themselves did not have a need for such hierarchy. While being aware of this historical trajectory is necessary, it would have been more interesting to learn how they perceived this imposition. The ethnographic perceptions can illustrate how deep transformations and implications turn out to be when mainstream societies impose ideologies and social-ecological systems upon smaller tribal communities.

Other communities of the Nilgiris feature in the section on arts and crafts, which is particularly interesting. Little-known aspects of ancient Nilgiri metallurgy by Sharada Srinivasan (Chapter 7), Kota pottery and the role of women in their community share excellent information on the indigenous crafts and skills of communities that have not featured much in literature apart from academia. Field notes from William Tallote (Chapter 9), an ethnomusicologist in the Nilgiris, render a short but interesting account of expressions of self, community and history through the music of the hill tribes.

Tarun Chhabra (Chapter 12) takes the music of the Todas a step further, providing translations of a few songs and tunes while also sharing a few of several insights he gained over years of work amid this fascinating indigenous community of the Nilgiri. Pratim Roy and Anita Varghese (Chapter 10) share a short but interesting insight of personal and community transformations through a protagonist, Rasu, an aged honey hunter. Healing as a pursuit of well-being, bridging gaps between spirit, nature and

human spaces is touched upon beautifully by Andrew Willford (Chapter 15) as he describes some of these facets through conversations with and experiences of the Irular and Alu Kurumba, the two Dravidian tribes present in the lower ranges of the Nilgiris.

Despite new scholarship, we still have limited knowledge of what measures can be instituted to produce more desirable outcomes in addressing issues of societal concern. Indigenous and local people's roles need to extend beyond mere subjects of research or narrow notions of participation. Frameworks to espouse relative control and recognition of their values and institutions can serve as guidance for collective road maps towards sustainable futures that we so often speak about but find difficult to bring into practice. For this, there needs to be a level playing field in how being informed can influence this process. To sum up, I use words from Tarun Chhabra's chapter describing a level playing field as it were, "Moreover these men had met

their match in an aboriginal group that showed absolutely no sense of subservience at all" (p 193). Subservience is the malleable route that sociocultural change often rides on; it manifests through social and technological hierarchy, and eventually is a power play in myriad forms. But change is constant, and such changes can find other routes to manifest as well.

Such kaleidoscopes provide hues and patterns through successive reflections by sharing insights from within, and from out of the endearing and socioculturally rich communities whose social ecologies we have trampled on over several years. It is time they too sit at the same table and have equal space in conversations that will enlighten our collective visions and futures. That is the next kaleidoscope to look forward to.

The author is thankful to the reviewer in improving the article.

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