

Landscape in a flux

A compendium on the Nilgiris shows how rapid urbanisation, climate change and exploitation have taken a toll on the indigenous people



▲ **Stepping out** Kotas and Badagas at a community gathering in Udhagamandalam. (SATHYAMOORTHY M.)

Geeta Doctor

It's difficult not to have echoes of A.E. Houseman's poem about "the land of lost content" rustling through the leaves of this compendium of images and histories on the Nilgiris collated by Paul Hockings.

As Professor Emeritus of Anthropology at the University of Illinois and also Editor-in-Chief of *Visual Anthropology*, Professor Hockings brings an overview of the area that we recognise as the Nilgiris. Between the introductory essay by Hockings on Ootacamund, also known as Ooty and Udhagamandalam, which has gone through many transformations after the Englishman John Sullivan planted his stake in the area, and the closing chapter written by Indu K. Mallah, who creates a mytho-poetic image of its inner world, the effect is of opening a portmanteau of recollections from the past.

These include a deeply perceptive engagement with the primeval forest lands and the people who have been living there as recorded by scholars from a variety of disciplines. It's also heavily cross-referenced with an extensive selection of notes and sources, even if some of these often mention Hockings' own contribution. There are maps, drawings, reproductions from old news items, and a comprehensive selection of photographs taken by an early enthusiast, the veteran photographer A.T.W. Penn.

Musical notes

In the chapter, 'A nineteenth century photographer of the Nilgiris and its People', Christopher Penn notes: "In 1865, now aged sixteen, Penn was sent to study at the Ooty studio. It was there (Plates 1-3) that he was married in 1870, raised his family, and then worked for almost half-a-century." As a further link to Penn, we are told that during a grand farewell to the family by the St. Stephen's choir group, the chief organist was a certain Charles Misquith. The notes confirm that the same Misquith was the owner of a shop at Madras, Misquith and Co. (founded in 1942), selling musical instruments, and that it continues in Chennai today as 'Musee Musical'.

Having established a survey of the unique vegetation and forests besides the weather with essays by R.J. Ranjit Daniels and Hans J. von Lengerke, the interest shifts to a description of the communities, particularly five major

tribal groups, Todas, Badagas, Kotas, Kurumbas and the Irulas. Each of them, or their sub-groups, live in individual clusters specialised in certain areas of production that they tended to barter on different occasions. Sharada Srinivasan in describing Ancient Nilgiri Metallurgy, and Marie-Claude Mahias on the women potters of Kota find fascinating stylistic and technical connections that suggest influences way beyond the blue mountains.

From references to the Toda influence on John Sullivan by Anthony R. Walker and the settlement taking shape under him in the early 19th century by Philip K. Mulley, we get 'Through Badaga Eyes: The Social Construction of a Cultural Landscape' by Frank Heidemann. Tarun Chhabra brings the Todas' recollection of the Raj alive through their songs; while William Tallotte describes the actual process of recording tribal music. Pratim Roy and Anita Varghese write a wonderful account of honey hunters who rappel down their ropes to collect honey from beehives clustered around



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the underside of cliffs.

Yet, as Indu K. Mallah writes in her essay, 'The Symbiosis of the Nilgiris', "although the symbiotic relationship between the indigenous peoples continues in essence and spirit today, time, changing values and lifestyles, and exploitation have taken their inexorable toll."

One can only end with a quote by Pope Francis as recorded by Indu K. Mallah who describes the unbreakable link between indigenous people and the environment.

"For them, land is not a commodity, but rather a gift from God and from their ancestors, who rest there, a sacred space with which they need to interact if they are to maintain their identity and values."

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The reviewer is a Chennai-based writer and critic.