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**Voices: Reconstruction of an ecological history through the voices of the people of the Nilgiris.**

By

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## Introduction

In this paper we try and reconstruct the ecological history and change in the livelihoods of the people in the Nilgiri area from oral histories. Oral histories detail the landscape in relation to the livelihoods of the people. It is a lively representation of the ecological changes. In our study we found that oral histories very clearly record quick and catastrophic changes like the occurrence of a natural calamity; the influx and eradication of a weed; inter community strife; the movements of people and communities or significant changes in livelihood patterns. Vegetation changes that are slow and long drawn, like the decrease in fodder grasses or an increase in the density of forests, or a change in the forest composition are more difficult to record through oral histories. These verbal records are very rich in detailing the changing relationship between the community and the environment. We use these oral histories and try and depict them on a map of the area to reconstruct the ecological history of the Nilgiri area.

These oral histories have been collected during my fieldwork mainly between 1990 and 1993. They consist of 49 oral histories collected during seven rounds of fieldwork. These oral histories covered 10 from the Sigur plateau; three from the Wynaad plateau; 25 from the Nilgiri plateau; three from the Coimbatore plains and eight from the Attapadi plateau. These interviews were taped, transcribed and archived at the Centre for Ecological Sciences, Bangalore. These Oral Histories were conducted on the basis of a checklist of issues to be discussed which included a variety of topics, like climate and water resources; vegetation; wildlife; land use; livestock; human population; livelihoods; settlement patterns and communication; and tradition and myth.

The choice of respondents for compiling the oral histories was opportunistic, with an attempt to seek out older, articulate and experienced persons who have played a critical role in the community or the landscape. These respondents come from a wide spectrum of backgrounds. They range from local ordinary members of the community; persons who hold a position in the community, like a village headman or a priest of the local temple; persons who have been recommended as being knowledgeable of the history of the area; and members of the elite, who have observed and participated in changes in the Nilgiri landscape. These oral histories outline the period from the distant past to changes that have been happening in the present. We cover two of the five ecological zones of the Nilgiri area and depict their unique ecological history through a selection of the voices of the people.

### **Voices of the Sigur Plateau**

The Sigur Plateau is situated north of the Nilgiri massif. This small plateau is contiguous with the Mysore plateau but separated from it by the 300-meter Moyar gorge, or the Mysore ditch. On the east, the Sigur plateau falls off 300 meters, steeply into the Coimbatore plains. In a sense the area is wedged in by the Nilgiri massif on the north, the Wynaad plateau in the west, the Moyar gorge in the south and the descent into the Coimbatore plains towards the east. The western portion of the plateau is moist, with an annual rainfall of about 1000 mm. The eastern edge is dry with an annual rainfall of 500 mm. The area is endowed with a climate that would support moist deciduous forests towards the west and dry vegetation forests in the east.

The vegetation has been in constant dynamics with the human population living in the area. The dense distribution of archaeological remains and the oral history and traditions of the area, suggest that the Sigur plateau has been under influences from the Coimbatore plains from historical times. These archaeological remains range from burial sites, with dolmens; hero stones; many remains of forts from the pre-British period until Tippu Sultan; many abandoned agricultural hamlets to abandoned remnants of early British ventures in the area.

The dynamics of the interaction of the people, with their environment suggests massive changes to the vegetation of the area. There have been significant changes in the modes of resource use of the people; massive changes in the composition and distribution of population; and a dynamic adaptation of the people to the environment. The area was obviously more densely populated than at present. It has remnants of kingdoms, pastoralists, and many agricultural areas, some of these provided with irrigation. Over the years, as this historical dynamics plays out, the area has experienced changes in vegetation composition. The dynamics between grassland, scrub and forests have been determined by changes in the resource use patterns on the Sigur plateau. During the historical period there have been experiments with new crops and the distribution, spread and contraction of weeds like *Opuntia* and *Lantana*.

The cultural landscape on the Sigur plateau is diverse with many communities, small and large utilising the area from historical times. Most of these early movements of people are from the Coimbatore plains, but later in the pre-British period there have been movements from the Mysore plateau and the Nilgiri plateau. In the British period there have been influences of the Colonial regime that affected the culture and organisation of the people of the area. And in the modern period, there have been massive influxes of people, as a consequence of development programmes and increased communication. However the older communities still live on with their means of livelihood and their oral histories enliven the changes during the period. These communities inhabiting the Sigur plateau have intensely interacted with each other and with communities of the surrounding area. Equations between these communities have been constantly changing and positions have been renegotiated in a dynamic way, suggesting a very alive and interactive set of communities in the historical past. Numerous cultural sites, with temples and festivals carry legends of the area that reinforce ritualistic positions in the social hierarchy. The area has had its measure of inter tribal violence reported in a very matter-of-fact way in oral histories.

The area has always been rich in various forms of wildlife. Many large mammals and predators shared this territory with the local communities. The oral histories cover a range of interactions between wildlife and local communities, from myths of interaction and relation with the wild animals to conflict with local communities. Shikar and game hunting has had its influence in the area. These activities have later given way to conservation initiatives that has had significant influences on the lives of people and their means of livelihoods.

Communication and markets have integrated the Sigur plateau in various ways with the outside world. The position of the Sigur plateau, tucked away a small distance away from one of the main thoroughfares of pre-British India, has however been a known territory to the people on the Coimbatore plains and the Mysore plateau. The famous Gajalhatti pass connecting Coimbatore plains and the Mysore plateau, go through the foothills of the Sigur plateau. In the pre-British period, there are indications that the area had been integrated with the Coimbatore plains by various chieftains whose artefact remnants and legend survive to this day. During the period of Tippu Sultan, while he integrated the major parts of southern India, the Sigur plateau was also firmly under his control. Tippu had set up routes and established garrisons on the Sigur plateau. The early routes to the isolated and cold environs of the Nilgiri plateau all passed through this area. Thus, this area had been well connected with the rest of peninsular India. However, in the British period and later, because of opening up of other communication routes, parts of the Sigur plateau became a dead-end for vehicular communication.

The ten oral histories pertaining to the area have been collected from a variety of people. They include older tribal residents of the area, many of whom are community leaders; members of the landed community who are resident in the

agricultural villages of the area; and persons from the Nilgiri plateau who have traditionally used the Sigur plateau and its human and natural resources for pastoral activities, either as a subsidiary activity to agriculture or as a full time livelihoods. These carefully recorded oral histories present the changing landscape of the Sigur plateau as snapshots, as experiences, as a dynamic relationship, and as a feeling in their voices. The overall picture may be patchy and incomplete, but they depict the changing landscape from diverse viewpoints in their own voices.

### **Voices of the Nilgiri plateau**

The Nilgiri plateau is a raised tableland on the Western Ghats chain of mountains. It is an isolated environment rising steeply to 1800 meters and above from the surrounding plains and lower plateau. On the western side, the access to the plateau is very steep from the 100-meter Nilambur plains. On the eastern side the plateau steeply rises from the Coimbatore plains situated at 300 meters. On the southern side it rises from the narrow Attapadi plateau and on the northern side the Nilgiri plateau rises from the 900-meter high Sigur plateau. The western parts of this triangular shaped raised massif, receives the fury of the south-western monsoon while the climate of the eastern side is protected and adequately watered, by the monsoon winds and streams<sup>1</sup>. The Nilgiri plateau is endowed with a unique tropical montane vegetation.

The Nilgiri plateau has been an isolated environment from surrounding plains for much of the historical period, until the British. Its people have had occasional interaction with the culture of the plains. Over the years the plateau has received waves of immigrants from the surrounding plains. These early waves of communities brought with them a livelihood pattern and culture and quickly adapted to the natural environment. The Todas are considered the first immigrants who brought with them the pastoral mode of resource use to the plateau. Speculation is that, they must have come in via the Cauvery delta and along the Bhavani and the Moyar rivers up to the plateau. They are considered the oldest inhabitants on the hills, and have a unique language. Based on the diversification of their language, they are estimated to have diverged from the Tamil culture around the Sangam period around 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC.

Their culture is built along the Moyar, which they consider a sacred river. They are thus confined to the northern and western part of the Nilgiri plateau. The Toda pastoralists worshipped the buffalo cult. They lived in camps or *munds* scattered in the Moyar basin. Each of these *munds* would have three to four families each. They would seasonally migrate and move within a confined space of the Nilgiri plateau over about 30 to 40 km. This small population of pastoralists have maintained their unique position as the earliest inhabitants on the Nilgiri plateau. From time to time this area has been in contact with the northern areas on the Mysore plateau.

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<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed and interesting review of the climate of the Nilgiri Area, refer to Lengerke.

The Badagas were the next major immigrants into the Nilgiris. This must have happened around the Vijayanagara period. They brought in settled agriculture into the Nilgiri plateau and settled in areas that were conducive for agriculture. These were confined to the eastern and southern parts of the plateau. There was thus a clear geographical separation between the predominantly pastoral territory and the agricultural territory. The Badagas adapted their culture to the Nilgiri plateau by growing specific varieties of grasses like ragi, varieties of wheat and a variety of barley and legumes suitable to the cold environment. They also developed a harmonious relationship with the small population of Todas inhabiting the Nilgiri plateau. The coming of the Badagas also exposed the Nilgiri plateau to the rest of the Mysore plateau and there were small diffusions of people from the Mysore plateau on to here. A few oral histories are of small communities who have lived in the Mysore and Wynaad plateau, and have migrated onto the Nilgiri plateau.

The Badagas had to negotiate equations with other communities on the hills. There were the forest dwelling Irulas and Kurumbas whose livelihoods consisted of hunting, gathering and shifting cultivation. Their labour was often necessary for agriculture. From some of the place names of Badaga villages, it is clear that these were Irula / Kurumba hamlets from where the original inhabitants were displaced by the Badaga cultivators. The relationship between the agriculturists and the forest dwellers were not without violence and bloodshed. But over time this relationship had achieved some stability. Many researchers and anthropologists have studied and written about the intertribal relation in the tribal microcosm of the Nilgiri<sup>2</sup>.

The next wave and deluge of immigrants came after the British opened up the area. The British found a salubrious climate on the hills and established sanatoriums and cantonments on the Nilgiri plateau. They also encouraged individual European entrepreneurs to come to the plateau and open up commercial plantations of coffee and tea. Opening up this area for tea plantations was not an easy operation. It was a labour intensive job and required a large labour force. This labour was recruited from all over the Tamil plains and the Mysore plateau. Recruiting labour was not easy. Labour contractors went out and recruited labour for the estates. Often droughts and calamities in the plains helped members of distressed families join the labour gangs. Often regional and kinship ties kept the labour gangs together. Thus we have estates and areas dominated by immigrants from Karnataka, and other areas dominated from specific districts of the Madras Presidency.

In the modern period, more waves of immigrants poured into the Nilgiri plateau. The development and construction of hydroelectric projects all over the Nilgiri plateau, the expansion of plantations and the aggressive expansion of forest plantations required massive labour force. The people who came into the Nilgiri for labour and livelihoods finally slowly settled on the plateau and made it their home. In addition there was a steady influx of people to provide services to the elite population that came to the Nilgiri plateau seeking its salubrious climate. They settled down in the towns of the plateau, and increased the urban population of the area.

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<sup>2</sup> For a detailed study on intertribal relationship, see Nurit Bird-David, and Hockins.

Drastic changes on the landscape were brought about on the Nilgiri plateau by the changing mode of resource use on the Nilgiri plateau. Three phases of landscape changes can be identified. The pastoral phase during the early history of the plateau may have favoured the growth of grasslands in certain pockets, but the low population density and the limited buffalo population may not have changed the landscape. The coming of the Badaga agriculturists must have caused large changes to the landscape. Clearing areas for permanent agriculture plots in the favourable sites must have caused irreversible changes to the Nilgiri plateau. But these were confined to the eastern parts of the plateau, away from the fury of the South West monsoonal winds and in the valleys. During the British and the modern period, massive changes in the landscape were affected. The first large-scale transformation of the landscape was by the expansion of coffee and tea plantations. These brought with them large labour colonies that were to be housed in the estate. Slowly, these immigrants moved out and started cultivation in nearby areas. Along with the growth of estates, as the towns of Nilgiri were formed and expanded, newer temperate crops were introduced into the Nilgiris. There was a demand for temperate vegetables and crops in these towns. This attracted many hardworking and enterprising farmers from Karnataka to establish vegetable cultivation in the environs of the towns. The final phase of vegetation changes were marked by the impact of the construction of hydroelectric projects; the expansion of forest plantations and the expansion of tea cultivation into the "non-traditional" western portions of the Nilgiri plateau. The consequence of the construction of hydroelectric projects on the Nilgiri plateau on the vegetation was indirect. These projects attracted a large labour force to the plateau in search of livelihoods. The labour that moved in for the construction stayed back and settled down in the Nilgiris. The hydroelectric projects were built in inaccessible areas of the plateau. The construction of roads into these areas opened out these untouched areas of the Nilgiris. After the construction of these projects, the forest department embarked on a massive plantation forestry programme. The shola grassland ecosystem was considered wastelands because they did not harbour timber and tree forests. These grasslands were to be replaced by a more productive use and plantation forestry was seen as a useful alternative to utilising the land resources of the Nilgiri plateau. It took many years for a better understanding of the ecosystem to stop the expansion of plantations. After the 80s, with increasing concern for the degradation of the environment, conversion of "unproductive" grasslands to plantations was finally halted. The current landscape of the Nilgiri plateau is thus shaped by cumulative forces through historical time on the Nilgiri plateau.

Twenty-five big and small oral histories have been recorded from the residents of the Nilgiri plateau. We capture snapshots and glimpses of these changes through the living voices of people on the Nilgiri plateau.