

Geographical Background of Nilgiris – A Study

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Abstract

The Nilgiris is one of most seasoned land masses of the earth. Indeed, even the Himalayan Mountains are accepted to be more youthful than this. The cool environment of Nilgiris was with the end goal that the swamp sicknesses didn't influence the badagas when they previously moved into the level. The air here isn't just unadulterated however with hallowed vibrations of energy and harmony where vegetation can be found undisturbed. This has made the majority of the waterways additionally consecrated. Pykara the greatest stream is the most hallowed of all. Each tree, plant, bloom, creeper and grass has a particular name in the Toda vernacular, many are considered holy thus never be unshakably annihilated. These braid single or in bunches are even presently fould standing commonly almost a stone or stream, these braid got away from the overall obliteration attributable to the offbeat apprehensions of these individuals who felt that these regions were the homes of concealed genii of the spot. The Jesuit minister Finicio visited the Nilgiris in 1602. Around then there existed three towns. Tuneri was the primary town. The forested would have been the primary Toda territory from second century BC. Sim's park in Coonoor lies in a wonderful little gorge and still contains some outstanding patches of regular reefs.

Keywords: Geographical Background of Nilgiris, The Nilgiris, Geographical of Nilgiris, Mountain of Nilgiris,

Introduction

The Nilgiris of the past was a combination of majesty, pristinity and serenity. This was due to the topography with undulating hills and valleys, the undisturbed montane evergreen forests and grasslands with its unique assemblages of life forms, the pure waters of the numerous streams and lakes, the tribes rich in their religious beliefs and cultures all interwoven by an amazing web of nature. The Nilgiris is one of the oldest land masses of the earth. Even the Himalayan Mountains are believed to be younger than this. It is one of very few places in the world where plant life has maintained its biological continuity over millions of years through many geological upheavals of climatic changes. The Shola grasslands and vegetations have not changed much since time immemorial.

Characteristically Himalayan flora and fauna are found in the higher levels of the Nilgiris. It is believed that are remnants of animals and plant life that were driven out during the glacial conditions happened in the Himalayas during the Quaternary ice age and isolated in the cool montane district which has temperate climate in the tropic of South India. There is an assumption that in the remote past Satpura and Vindhyas mountains were continuous with Assam Hills on the east and Western Ghats on the west and acted as a path for the Himalayan variety to cross over the Nilgiris. Due to geotectonic movements Nilgiris was isolated with the disappearance of the bridge. In the Pre-British period the natural vegetation would have been dense with rich wildlife. The first geographical and statistical survey of any value was completed in 1847 by James Ochterlony. He mentions about how they were sacred off by the solitariness of areas lacking resident population. To cite an example the O'valley area at that time was called as Anaikadu for plentiful elephant population and other big game like Bison and spotted deer. Now they are nowhere to be seen.

Tarun Chabra's recent account about the dry seasonal hamlets of the Todas with rolling grasslands, shola forests, thickets swamps, plentiful showers that ensure fresh grass and fodder in the burnt areas, the wild animals at close quarters, and his mention about the Bangitapal terrain near Mukurti Peak in original glory where plantation failed is another proof. These areas still remain as God willed them to be and not as man moulded them. (R.Prabakar, 1975)

Michel Danio's about the Longwood shoal, the remnant of primeval forests known as sholas picture its bountiful nature, with wide variety of plants, legged and winged havitats not disturbed since time unmemorial. The cool climate of Nilgiris was such that the low land diseases did not affect the badagas when they first moved into the plateau. The Naturalist who accompanied John Sullivan in 1819 recovered his health from a worst condition in the cool climate.

The atmosphere is such in the interior that even now the tribal children amuse themselves by hearing buffaloes playing in the seemingly limitless grass hills, fearless of the wild animals that roam around their hamlets.

The Congenial Atmosphere

Crisp and pure air is one of the basic needs of plant and animal life. In the higher levels there are numerous natural sites considered sacred by the Todas. These sites were undisturbed by man and were charged by tribal invocations, prayers and chants. The air here is not only pure but with sacred vibrations of energy and peace where flora and fauna can be found undisturbed. These sascred sites are deity hills, sacred summits, slopes, thickets, tress and streams and the dairy temple complex. A visit to some of these inaccessible sites will make a person feel transported back to a thousand years. Because here the nature is still in pristine glory. Besides there is some sanctity attached to these hills. Such a concept of sacredness of these mountains was felt by a missionary as well. Any spiritual minded person can realize this.

Abundant water source

Nilgiris in the Pre-British period was a spider's web of countless streams forming into dignified rivers and falls of great beauty. It was impossible to move a quarter of a mile in any direction without crossing streams. Besides due to its elevation the Nilgiris has been blessed with torrential rainfall both during southwest Monsoon and Northeast Monsoon. This has made most of the rivers also sacred. Pykara the biggest river is the most sacred of all. They do not use the river water for any purpose. They do not even touch it unless they have to ford it. Palol the dairy man priest is forbidden to cross the river by bridge. Women can not take water from domestic streams on certain days. Even on other days the women while drawing water can not wash at the stream out must carry the water away. Thus water has been conserved by considering it sacred.

The Status of Flora and Fauna under Todas and Kotas

For a very long time vast stretches of woodland in the Nilgiris remained remote. The animals were able to thrive due to abundance of food, freedom from human disturbance and congenial habitat. This continued even after the Todas occupying the upper part of the Nilgiris. They would have colonised the Nilgiris atleast from 2nd century B.C. When Raja Wodeyar became the ruler of Mysore the first mention of Toda in 1117 A.d. is found. Kotas moved to the Nilgiris from Mysore. Although they are musicians and artisans they have considerable skill as farmers. The biodiverse form has been preserved by them.

The Todas are closely entwined with nature. Hallnathi Poo, Essenci Poo, Sodamalli, Vasamalli were the names of Toda girls who were the school mates of the scholar proving this. Every tree, plant, flower, creeper and grass has a specific name in the Toda dialect; many are considered sacred and so never are willfully destroyed. Many floral varieties are used for their rituals and ceremonies. Throny bush, bamboo reeds, wooden stumps some tree branches and leaves are used during ceremonial drinking and eating. For a single ceremony they required at least a dozen varieties. They preserved these varieties around their hamlets, because they believed that only after performing all the rituals can they be qualified to enter the afterworld of Amunawer that is considered very essential for the Todas.

Besides Todas being pure vegetarians they were in no way a threat to the edible game. The wild animals like Tiger and Panther to a small degree had been responsible for the loss of their buffalo calves. But they accepted this philosophically and sometimes dealt them with the help of the local kurumbas or kotas. It is obvious that the animals were conserved.

The Todas have the practice of burning grass annually. This was to obtain a fresh sprout of tender grass after the burn. They have been practicing this ancient custom without causing much damage to the nearby surroundings. (Hockings Paul 1975) Their view is that the burning could destroy insects and fungi inimical to cattle and that it causes a general sterilization of the grasslands. Moreover the areas that was not subject to periodic fires carried mostly tall and coarse grass not palatable and relished by cattle, whereas the burnt areas carry short and palatable grasses of different species.

The Todas lead very simple life. Their wants are very meager. Their dependence upon the environment except the pasture is little. More over being very less in population they would have really conserved nature.

The status of Flora and Fauna under Badagas

With the fall of the Vijayanagar Empire in 1565 waves of immigrants moved into the Nilgiris, the reason might be famine or political disturbances. In the early phase of their settlement they came in contact with Todas and Kurumbas who gave them shelter. The Todas gave them a number of uninhabited religious sites. Badagas who initially occupied the hills as mine slaves became cultivation. Dense forests and woodlands were much favoured over grass lands for village sites. The tracts which are now under agriculture were once covered with dense jungles. The shoal trees are the evidence. These trees single or in groups are even now found standing generally near a rock or stream, these trees escaped from the general destruction owing to the superstitious fears of these people who thought that these areas were the homes of unseen genii of the place. (Chabra Tarun, 1973) The large trees beside their temples bears ample witness to this. The name of their villages to this the names of their villages are connected to dense forests, woodlands, swamps, grasslands, shrubs and other species. The frequent occurrence of the suffix Kad in the names of localities where now hardly a tree is found is another proof.

The Jesuit priest Finicio visited the Nilgiris in 1602. At that time there existed three villages. Tuneri was the first village. This priest saw the badgas in Melkudah. They had adequate mixed farming practices and reared cattle, poultry, goats and raised wheat and milled and ate honey. (Chabra Tarun 1995) They raised Korali samai around their villages which was their staple diet. The Todas received from the Badagas a tribute called Gudu a basket of grain partly in compensation for the land taken up by them. Moreover as they were not self sufficient they exchanged rice for ghee from the Todas. The semi pastoral badagas selected more healthy residential sites. The number of villages increased. When the Todas occupied the lands above 1700 m Badagas occupied the lands between 1500m and 2000m. They found out medicinal uses of a dozen of new species of plants that were confined to this plateau. The medicinal value of local plants was discovered by badaga women who tended goats and observed closely the feeding habits of their animals.

Their agriculture in the beginning was of subsistence only. There was no market place in the plateau and they never participated in the market economy of the plains. Some people gathered honey, bee wax, wild flax, sandalwood and resin and sold them to the people in plains. When the fame of Toda's butter reached till Bombay the badagas formed trading parties in the gangs and walked through steep jungles infested by wild animals and Kurumba sorcerers to sell these things. The jungles through

which they were able to move only in gangs for the fear of wild animals is an evidence for the rich status of wild life.

Zone-wise Status of Flora and Fauna in the Pre-British Period

As there is variation in topography climate and rain fall from place to place there are variations in the plant and animal life.

Sigur Plateau

Here the Todas have maintained pastures for their cattle. The first available map of the Nilgiris in 1822 show the vegetation topography and early routes. There were dense jungles rich in sandalwood and other forest trees with perennial streams.

Wayanad

It was thickly forested. Rich soil and high rainfall provided favourable climate for rich flora and fauna. The beauty attracted the strangers, but the low ranges made them ill with Malaria.

Nilabur Valley

It gets an annual rainfall of 3000mm to 6000mm. With wide altitudes ranges it contains a variety of evergreen vegetation. Many of which are still biologically undescribed. The bottom of the valley contains low evergreen forests. This area is famous for spice mainly pepper and forest produce. It had links with international spice trade from the 17th century through the Zamorin of Calicut.

Attapadi Plateau

The forested would have been the main Toda habitat from second century BC. Hunting gathering and shifting cultivation groups like Irulas and Kurumbas, agricultural and artisanal Kotas inhabited this before the Badagas. This area is known for its rich fauna and flora, and forest products like honey and wax.

Coimbatore Plains

It lies in the rain shadow part of the Nilgiris. It consists of deciduous forests and thorny scrub. The eastern slope has dense forests. During the first and second century the area was thickly forested. During 9th century agriculture expanded. So forests started.

Rich Plant and Animals

Prior to 1845 the Botanical Gardens was in a primitive state. The upper portion was under forest cover with big trees on its steep and rugged banks, the lower part was a swamp with deep ravines. Bits of such fine old scholars are still found undisturbed in the nooks corners of the ground. Sim's park in Coonoor lies in a beautiful little ravine and still contains some admirable patches of natural shoals. Longwood shoal in the vicinity of Kotagiri is one of the few remnants of primeval forests, seem to have little fauna left apart but a closer look would reveal the presence of larger inhabitants. All this flora and fauna is under threat and has suffered much by human hands.

It is clear that in the Pre-British period the population was very less. Their wants were meager, and life simple and sustainable. As a result the status of the animal life would have been in original glory.

Conclusion

Typically Himalayan verdure is found in the more elevated levels of the Nilgiris. It is accepted that are remainders of creatures and vegetation that were driven out during the chilly conditions occurred in the Himalayas during the Quaternary ice age and separated in the cool montane locale which has calm environment in the subject of South India. There is a presumption that in the distant past Sathpura and Vindhyas mountains were ceaseless with Assam Hills on the east and Western Ghats on the west and went about as a way for the Himalayan assortment to get over the Nilgiris. Due to geotectonic developments Nilgiris was secluded with the vanishing of the extension. Obviously in the Pre-British time frame the populace was exceptionally less. Their needs were pitiful, and life straightforward and supportable. Thus the situation with the creature life would have been in unique wonder.

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