

Submitted Abstract

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Abstract

The first systematic accounts of the ecological and ethnic profile of the Nilgiri Mountains of South India date back to the 19th century, in the frame of the British colonial explorations of the Indian subcontinent. Since then, progressive anthropogenic interventions have deeply transformed both the environmental and social configuration of the region.

Five indigenous groups are considered as the traditional inhabitants of the Nilgiris, each occupying a specific ecological niche: the Todas, the Badagas, the Kurumbas, the Kotas and the Irulas. As far as the upper plateau is concerned - an area with peaks above 2500 m - it is possible to distinguish between two types of vegetation: the sholas, i.e. tropical montane forests, and the grasslands, the latter extending over much larger tracts than the former, as already noticed in the 19th-century.

The antiquity of human settlement in this region as well as the ancient distribution of forest areas with respect to grasslands have long been the object of debate and are currently being re-addressed by the Nilgiri Archaeological Project.

Be as it may, it is a fact that some of the forest patches survived to the present day retain a religious value for two of the indigenous communities, the Badagas and the Kurumbas. Although highly differentiated from a socio-economic standpoint, these two groups maintain a tight bond when it comes to some annual rituals which are performed (or used to be performed) at specific sites in the proximity of sacred groves. Interestingly enough, these sites feature the presence of dolmens, which are a distinctive component of the archaeological landscape of the Nilgiris (carvings on some of them date to the 12th-17th centuries).

By moving from cases of rituals jointly performed by Badaga and Kurumba groups at different sites, this contribution tackles the possible correlation between ancient sacred groves and dolmen distribution in the region. This may enhance our understanding of the interaction of those two indigenous communities between themselves and with the surrounding environment throughout history.