

# Navigating the Indigenous Nilgiris



Fig. 1

## **Ramya Reddy**

Photographer–visual anthropology, artist, author  
Email: ramya@ramyareddy.com

### **Abstract**

This essay introduces the story of a place and its people, the Nilgiris and its indigenous cultures studied and documented over nine years through a matrix of prose and photography, and presented in my book, *Soul of the Nilgiris: A Journey through the Mountains* (published December 2018, Rajesh & Ramya Reddy). The scope of the project includes the landscape, endemic ecology, people—with an emphasis on five Indigenous groups of the Upper Nilgiris: Toda, Kurumbas, Kotas, Irulas and Badagas. The bases for studies were made up of: empirical data drawn from personal experiences and interviews, on-ground research and photography; journals, anthropological books, archives; interviews with scholars, local historians and researchers—all of which were also used to further verify the empirical data to the best extent possible.

### **Sections**

**I. Introduction: The land and its people:** a brief introduction to the region including the geographical orientation, ecology, native people and the unique barter system that supported their livelihoods, with an emphasis on the role played by indigenous beliefs and traditions and how these knowledge systems were organically geared towards conservation.

**II. Beginnings and the sweep of a personal journey:** orientation to the author's personal ties with the Nilgiris and its people, including the forging of important relationships with the adivasis which informed some of the stories. It also briefly throws light on the development including data collection, photography and writing.

**III. Building a Knowledge base:** elaborates on the research, data collection with an emphasis on the empirical route elucidated with some examples.

**IV. Postscript:** conclusion, purpose of this project and some thoughts on integrating the adivasi knowledge and know-how into the mainstream.

Fig. 2, 3, 4 (see detailed captions in the appendix below)



### **Introduction: the land and the people**

Steep slopes. Lush forested foothills. Varying summits enveloped by clouds. Everything in a haze of blue. This is the Nilgiris, or the Blue Mountains, located in the Western Ghats of Tamil Nadu in southern India. Rising over 2000 meters above the sea level, and extending north to south for nearly 1600 kms along the western coast of peninsular India, the Western Ghats are home to over 30 percent of the country's endemic flora and fauna. The site's high montane forest ecosystems influence the Indian monsoon so profoundly that these ranges are called the 'mountains of the monsoon'.

The Nilgiris shoots east to west, running perpendicular to the main body of the ghats and towards the Deccan plateau. The principal rivers of southern India are born in the endemic Shola forests here. In September 1986, the UNESCO constituted the Nilgiris ecosystem and its surrounding environments as the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve, the area, located in one of the world's ten biodiversity hotspots. Among the crashing rapids and quiet pools thrives an exceptional density of endemic species. Endangered species like the majestic lion-tailed macaque, the Nilgiri tahr, and the Nilgiri langur sit on treacherous ledges, looking down at some of the largest lakes in the region. The Kurinji, a type of *Strobilanthes* with purple-blue flowers, blossoms only once in 12 years in the upper slopes of the Nilgiris.



Fig. 5, 6, 7



Fig. 8

The main ethnic groups in the upper Nilgiris include the aboriginals or Adivasis comprising the pastoral Todas—thought to be the most ancient—and the artisan Kotas. The agrarian, erudite Badagas, though not considered aboriginal, form the largest indigenous community in the

Nilgiris. Adivasis and hunter-gatherer Kurumba are settled on both slopes reaching into the lower elevations, while the Irulas, are mainly found in the lower slopes and plains. There are several other adivasi groups including the Paniyas, Kaatunaickens, Cholanaickens, and other groups of Kurumbas inhabiting the Wayanad side of the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve reaching well into the plains. As of 2011 Census, the population of Scheduled Tribes in the Nilgiris constitutes 4.46% to the total population in the district.



Fig. 9, 10, 11, 12, 13

The scope of this essay is limited to the native people in the upper Nilgiris plateau and slopes: Todas, Kotas, Kurumba, Badagas, and the Irulas. For the longest time, the

indigenous people in the upper Nilgiris had a symbiotic existence. They directly exchanged goods and services until the early twentieth century. Several socio-cultural layers and divides determined the barter, but the cornerstone of the system was a keen understanding of the natural world. The need-based manner in which these groups settled across the hills (and still do) meant that they each possessed a corpus of uniquely rich ethnobotanical knowledge of the areas. A senior Alu Kurumba healer, Janagiamma, who I spent some days with, knows about most every shrub, creeper, or tree, in the area, and grew some of them carefully for medicinal potions. She had studied the ethnobotany of the land since the age of five.

Fig. 14, 15



Their ancestors, and gods and goddesses: Aihnn and his daughter, Taihkirshi—who is believed to have created the Todas; Kwattein, the diary-priest diety, and his consort, the Kurumba goddess Teikosh; Hethe, the ancestress goddess of the Badagas—to name a few—resided near the peaks, in the sacred woods, groves, and water systems.

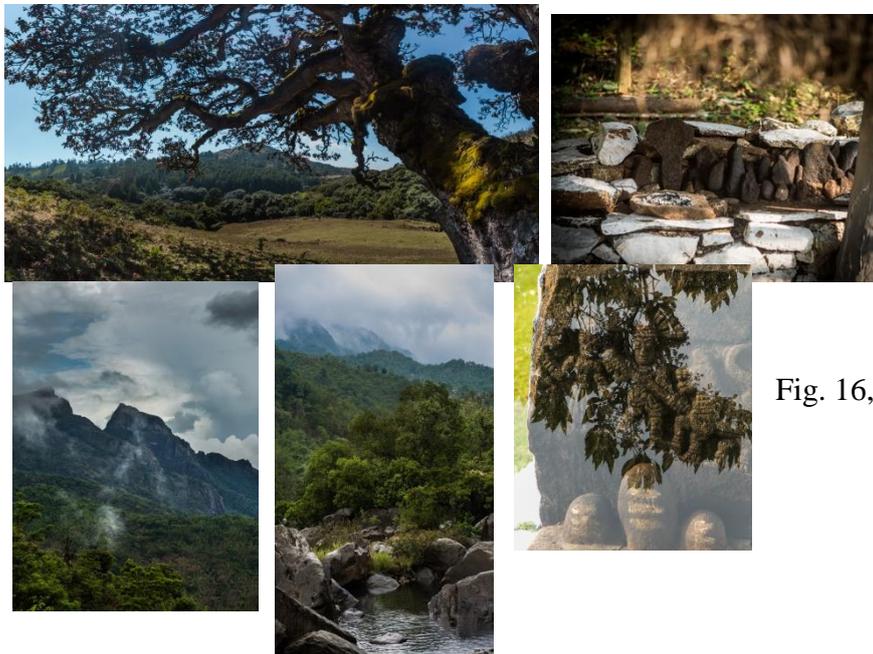


Fig. 16, 17, 18, 19, 20

The native ecological cycles dictated how much could be taken, sown, reaped, or exchanged. In the matrix of this barter system, the pastoral Todas occupied the highest slopes, luxuriant with grasslands. As dairy-people, their lives centred around the sacred buffalo: the dairy was both the temple as well as the source of all sustenance. They gave dairy products, mainly the ritually significant ghee or clarified butter, in

exchange for goods and services from the others. The Badagas, the chief agrarians, settled across the high central plateau, most conducive for cultivation. They provided grain and vegetables in exchange for other products and ceremonial services.

The hunter-gatherer Kurumbas, who lived in the dense forests on the slopes, specialised in forest produce such as honey and medicinal plants. They were also considered powerful sorcerers and healers, whose services were thus called on for spiritual protection and curing ailments.

Fig. 21, 22



The Kotas, the artisans, were musicians, potters, smiths and leather-workers whose settlements were strewn around the high central plateaus, often close to the Badaga hamlets. The Kota women made clay pots that are still crucial in the domestic and ritualistic lives of the other communities. Kota musicians played during the many festivals and life ceremonies of the Badagas, who in turn paid them in grain. The Irulas, like the Kurumbas, occupied the lower slopes reaching into the foothills. Primarily hunter-gatherers, they were also skilled honey collectors and agriculturists known for their excellent methods of mixed cultivation involving native grain, millets and other forest produce. Though not heavily bound by formal ties to the other communities, they exchanged forest produce and grain. As reputed healers and shamans, on occasion, they provided priestly services during some Badaga festivals.



Fig. 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28

The Chettis, from the nearby plains entered the barter in the 1800s after the British opened up the hills for trade. The barter system was beyond commerce. Based as it was on the seasonal cycles and rituals of the natives, it had an inviolable sanctity. The economic exchange had social dimensions, so that it took place not in a set

marketplace, but according to established relationships, mostly between families, clans, and communities who performed the ritual and ceremonial duties for one another.

### **Beginnings and the sweep of a personal journey**



Fig. 29, 30

I forged a deep connection with the mountains as a child. As I grew up, I realised I was drawn to that particular quality of mountain light that suffused me with warmth and longing, a feeling I sought everywhere, but found only in the mountains. Several early associations combined with time spent in the mountains at a photography school, over the years, led to the capturing the place observing through photography. What started out as a photo series took a life of its own when I started writing which happened naturally as I began to meet the indigenous people.

By sheer chance, in late September 2008, my husband Rajesh and I, visited a Toda hamlet, Theppekodu mund, in the Avalanchi area in southwestern Nilgiris. This was my first experience of the place and people that grew into kind of fieldwork through photography. A group of bright, chattering Toda children, who were flanked by women engrossed in their embroidery work, got up and came running towards us to make enquiries. Led by them we met the women artisans (some of who were their mothers), the creators of the famous black and red Toda embroidery, at work, in their beautiful, remote habitat. Their striking features reminded me of the American Indians. An older lady who looked like a matriarch came enquiring after us and welcomed us into her home for tea. I learnt a little about this community lived and worked from her, and bought my first Toda shawl.



Fig. 31, 32, 33, 34

Photographs did not seem enough, I wanted to learn more—for starters about their beautiful settlements, and how they lived. And so, I returned in less than a month. At the time, I had little idea of what this would turn out to be.

As I acquainted myself with the Adivasi people, I was deeply affected by how the elders, the repository of indigenous knowledge, stored through observation/participation and generational transmission, still strove to live in synchronicity with the ways of the mountains, harmonising respectfully with their lands upon which their livelihoods depended, notwithstanding how profoundly climate and socio-cultural changes have continued to alter the seasonal cycles and lifestyles over the past decades. Indigenous legends and folklore are ways of passing on ecological wisdom. By adapting to the constantly changing patterns of weather and seasonal cycles, the native elders have long been able to predict weather. They observe subtle signs, using intuition and experience. For a long time, Toda elders predicted the onset of the monsoon with stunning accuracy.

Mutsin (now deceased), a Toda elder who I met through the Toda scholar, Dr. Tarun Chhabra, in February 2014, and came to know closely over the years, once told me that even though water was not a scarce resource, they prayed for timely rainfall. But now, there are such fundamental shifts in seasonal cycles that they pray for any rain that might come. ‘You know, we never had to go to doctors’, she’d say, ‘The Sholas had all the medicines we needed. But health issues are more complicated now, and it is hard to find some of these medicinal plants.’ Elder Todas, to whom life was about an organic interconnectedness with nature, these must be difficult times.



Fig. 35, 36, 37

Mutsin believed that the younger Todas, who have been raised in the ways of the *munds* (Toda settlements)—where, the sacred dairy is not just an occupation: keeping and tending to buffaloes are deeply spiritual activities bound with life’s rites of passage—but also with competing modern ideas, risked losing a sensitive understanding of their native ecosystems which were passively safeguarded by the inherent wisdom in such traditional occupations and practices that upheld them. For instance, the Toda pastoral duties of keeping and tending to buffaloes include rituals intended for the well-being of the ecosystem. A good example in this regard would be the salt ceremony, where the dairy priest gives salt water to the buffaloes at the onset of different seasons. The water drawn for this ritual is from a protected stream or pond of high sanctity. The salt ceremony marks the tribe’s hope for—some would say hand in—the rightful transition of seasons for the health of the ecosystem, ensuring that the buffaloes continue to bless the community. This is an indirect method of conservation in itself. Just a week after prayers are offered at the end of summer, it is believed that the southwest monsoon reaches the Nilgiris.

Mutsin and I would mull on how the gradual erosion of such legacy knowledge and wisdom passed down generationally—which will likely have far reaching effects

on the ecological balance of the entire region—can be mitigated if the continued transmission of knowledge from the elders could be imbibed by the generic mainstream education that the adivasi children receive in their schools. Can the indigenous ecological knowledge be imbibed alongside the standardised western education they receives? Perhaps the elders can themselves be engaged by the schools? Why is regional pedagogy so far removed from the needs of the people or a place? Perhaps the Toda kids could be empowered with scientific tools to run sustainable dairies? Perhaps the Kurumba child can learn indigenous medicine alongside western methods? Almost every time I met an indigenous child, I felt saddened to see that, again, owing to the stress of the confusing times they live in, their own rich legacy seemed “less” of an education, when it might actually be the highest touchstone of cultural and ecological conservation. This is not to say that the indigenous children must not have access to modern life and its comforts. The question looming here is how indigenous knowledge can be merged with modern education for the benefit of humanity at large.



Fig. 38, 39, 40

With their expansive perception of time, the adivasis live their lives slowly and fully, with a sense of history that goes back many centuries – right down to the time before the makings of any civilisation lay claim to their lands, an acute impulse for the present, and a future that one is responsible for. I began to recognise, to my growing dismay, the gradual depletion of the priceless intellectual and spiritual legacies of the region, along with the environment in which they thrived.

My fieldwork gradually taught me that the old ways were not simply cultural constructs, but served a more practical purpose: they enabled man to live harmoniously with nature. Tales and legends set in the forests and on mountain peaks are not just windows into the cultural soul of a place, they are also pathways into the landscapes. They provide insights into the local ecology that can, in turn, lead to preservation. The Toda built their barrel vaulted home using wild grasses and rattan cane procured from the grasslands. They believe that their distinctive homes were inspired by a peculiar barrel-shaped rainbow that appeared in the Nilgiri skies. The Todas, who have extensive ethnobotanical knowledge about the upper Nilgiris, practised a grass burning ritual for centuries. They would consciously set a controlled fire to select areas of the grassland at specific times in a year. The fire was set by

creating friction with dry sticks obtained only from a particular species of a Shola tree from the *Lauraceae* family known as *Keizsh* in Toda. This practice encouraged a healthier regeneration of wild grasses vital to their sacred buffaloes as well as the health of the Shola-grassland complexes. Failing to see the wisdom behind it, both the British colonial government and later, the state government, prohibited this practice.

Almost every Badaga settlement is connected to a piece of venerated forest or scared grove, known as *banagudi* (In Badaga, *bana* means forest and *gudi* means temple). The honey-gathering Kurumbas and Irulas maintain that honey can be harvested only at specific times in a year. Harvest quotas are restricted based on the ecological health of the region in the given season. Once again, these understandings, passed down generations over thousands of years, are embedded in the songs and stories of honey gatherers. Even bees can be read through such folklore, and bee activity, as is widely understood, is an important ecological health indicator.



Fig. 41, 42, 43, 44

Seeing the Nilgiris for what it truly is needs a long and continuous watch. I did not want to be a mere visitor seeking the exotic. Working independently on the project, I had the autonomy, time, and privilege to get to know the indigenous people and form trusting relationships over a long stretch of time. I spent about half a year, each year, in the Nilgiris, as my project blossomed with vigour, in the present direction, over the past four years.

Through the microcosm of the Nilgiris, I could see how easily we were losing sight of the nuances of a culture in its connection to an entire ecosystem, of the subtle but vital ways of connecting with nature and through her, ourselves. As one does when something precious feels like it is slipping from one's hands, and with the hope that telling these stories can have a resonance to something more universal, I felt the need to capture and share whatever I could. Perhaps I could create a small platform from where indigenous voices in this small piece of the planet's ethnosphere might be heard.

I began with journal entries and photographs of the landscapes and indigenous people, the Toda mainly at the outset. A dedicated photo series became a photobook, morphing into a larger project of documentation, as I began to visit the tribal villages more frequently, building relationships with some of the community leaders. This

alone helped broaden the scope of the project hugely. I was also very lucky in that I had friends and inspiring mentors in Rev. Philip Mulley, an eminent Badaga scholar, theologian and Nilgiris historian; Pratim Roy, the founder-director of Keystone Foundation; Indu Mallah, a prolific author-poet from the Badaga community; and Dr. Tarun Chhabra, the Toda scholar.

All of them connected me with resource persons, leaders from the various communities, while also guiding me with intellectual insights, fact checking and constructive feedback at every stage. Their consistent support was instrumental in the making of (the book) name.



Fig. 45

Following the data collection, the synergies between photographs and text informed my story telling, photography informed prose and vice versa. The stories include hard data but are also rich with personal experience that came with real, lasting relationships with the communities. To emphasise this, I maintained an intimate tone with a sense of immediacy which was simple, lighthearted, and yet conveyed the meanings and messages.



Fig. 46, 47

As the book started to concretise in its format, I started to invite the community members to participate in its making. These were their stories, after all, and considering the weight personal narratives and experiences had in the storytelling, I wanted to bring in, even if in a small way, an active community involvement. This turned out to be another fantastic pathway to learning more about their arts and crafts: Around 20 ladies from the Toda community created the hand embroidered spine over 2 years for some 2000 books. This was a long drawn, difficult project: We spent a few months just getting the size right. I learnt a lot about the craft, fabric, thread counting and so on, better than I could grasp by looking at the process once or twice or by

reading. I also got to learn a little more about the real lives of these women. And indigenous art cannot be a rushed process. To the extent my timelines permitted, I learned to work with their perception of time because to the indigenous people slowness of life mattered, life rituals: births, deaths, community and celebrations held great meaning and work just had to fit in with all these. Work was not the most pressing thing, as it is for those of us inhabiting the versions of busy life we have created for ourselves. I also worked with some Kurumba artists to create limited edition bookmarks for the book. Again, a cumbersome process, but one which took me into the homes and lives of these very gifted artists.



Fig. 48, 49

By the time we reached the project end, those who worked with me developed a relationship with the book and looked forward to holding a copy in their hands. Each time I had a dummy in hand, I showed it to them to get their thoughts.

A lot went into its making of this book in its current format to capture its essence and soul while involving the community. This work is as much that of the indigenous communities of the Nilgiris as it is mine. And all the proceeds are going back to the indigenous communities themselves via Kotagiri-based Keystone Foundation (that works on eco-development initiatives with indigenous communities).



Fig.50

This work and trusting bonds built through its making in—in this particular format—will be the basis for any significant work I plan to pursue with the communities in the future.

### Building a knowledge base



Fig. 51, 52

Lots of anthropological and scholarly work on the Nilgiris has been done over several decades by eminent anthropologists, linguists and historians. One of the oldest communities in southern India, the Todas, for instance, have attracted anthropologists from across the world for a couple of centuries. English anthropologist W.H.R. Rivers, who researched the Todas between 1901–02, says in his monumental book *The Todas* (1906) (publication details in the bibliography) that he was reproached by more than one contemporary academic for going to “people about whom we already know so much.” Rivers, however, believed there was a lacuna in certain areas and proceeded with his research. Other distinguished anthropologists who studied the Todas are Edgar Thurston, and more recently, Murray B. Emeneau, Anthony Walker and Tarun Chhabra (Orient Blackswan 2015). In this regard, Nilgiris at large has been very well represented. The access to academic research texts and books, however, is not easy for everyone. This important anthropological work is mostly sequestered away in the university libraries in foreign countries. It was a struggle for me to dig out many of these books and journals; I found some of the out-of-print books in the Nilgiris Library in Ooty while many others, upon sustained searching online, mainly on paid archive sites. Needless to say, over the years, I read almost every possible book, academic journal and paper on the Nilgiris I could lay my hands on or had access to. I spent a considerable amount of time digging these out for my research and taking notes. These were very important in that they gave me a basis with which to work and understand the context and the people better.

These studies gave me an understanding of the people with whom I developed a special bond of friendship with over the past few years. My essays on the Todas, and the other communities, however, are about the wisdom behind some of their practices and why they might be relevant in the times we live in; how their folklore (passed down orally, and often narrated/sung during rituals and ceremonies)—coded richly with various aspects of their life, heritage and ecology—annotates the nuances of the land; and finally my conversations with the elders who hold some of the last vestiges of undiluted Toda culture.

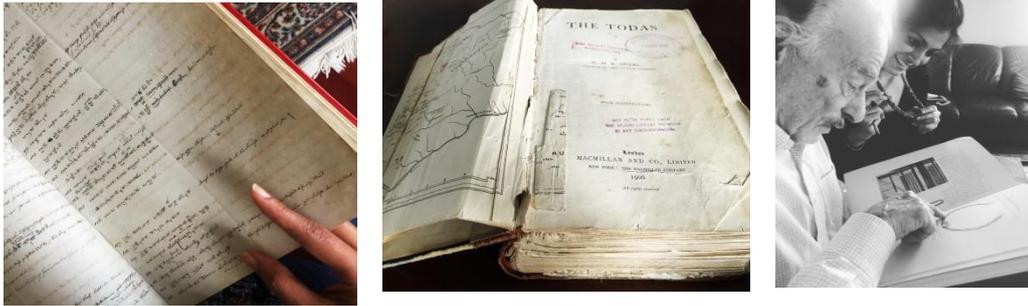


Fig. 53, 54, 55

I still believe more work needs to be done where the story of a place is told through the intimate stories of the indigenous people in their voice, with their narrative and sensibilities, for providing an intimate understanding of indigenous communities, as also to touch a larger audience in a comprehensible way.

I am tempted in this connection to share some of these stories. Among the many things Janagiamma, a senior healer from the Kurumba community shared with me were short stories, folklore and some tenets that singularly informed her healing techniques and medical recipes which were handed down orally through generations of a single family. “Only those who seek, are bestowed with the knowledge,” She said, ‘Because healing works only if one is connected to it deeply. The medicines must be activated with intent and sacred *mantrams* (chants). They will not work on their own. This requires the healer to work with intuition and perseverance.’ Learning was not imparted deliberately or theoretically. It just ‘happened’ by osmosis. The student simply went along with the teacher and learnt on the field by observing and assisting. Such insights and firsthand accounts about their practices, coming directly from the Adivasis themselves, is as valuable as it is real in how it connects them to the reader. Getting a glimpse into their lives makes them approachable and has the power to inspire genuine care towards their welfare in the right direction.

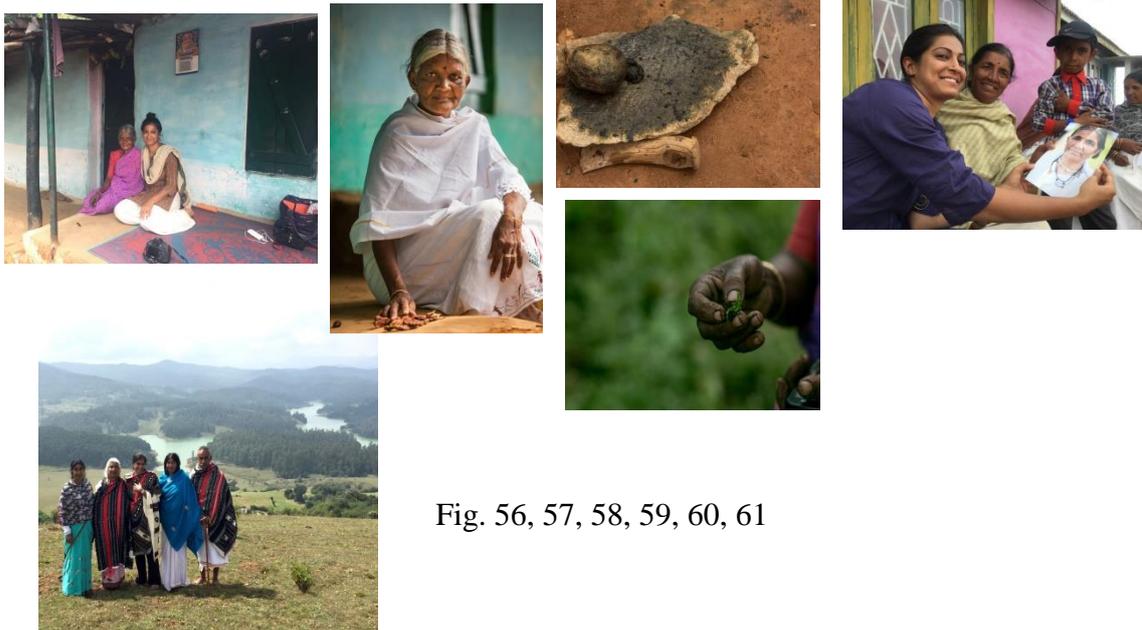


Fig. 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61

While I depended on the many books, online resources, and the guidance of my mentors for my research, I stayed in constant contact with the members of the indigenous community gathering empirical data. Much of what is in the book is drawn from my personal interactions with the indigenous people. Having said that, I understand that the content of oral interviews, as noted above with Janagiamma's example, is personal, experiential and interpretive because, by its nature, it relies on the memories, perceptions and orally transmitted information. While I have tried my best to present their narrative as faithfully as possible.

My objective has been to help people connect with the region in a deeply emotional sense. This was the main purpose why I explored the Nilgiri region and the people living there, which finally gave birth to my book *Soul of the Nilgiris*. So, even though the book has been slotted as a 'coffee-table book' I am ok with it as long as the message and purpose of the project come through. *Soul of the Nilgiris* is not, therefore, an anthropological record but a personal chronicle of experiences with the land and the indigenous people from a region in India that involves visual anthropology to communicate an important context with clarity.



Fig. 62, 63

### Postscript

I am often asked how this work would benefit the region, the communities. For one, I hope it will help lead us past the patronising and exoticising, as is often how tribal communities, the real guardians of our forests and natural wealth, are generally treated. Those of us from other communities have the power to and must preserve the last of what is left of indigenous culture and ancient wisdom.

The dairy talents of the Toda men, the embroidering artistry of the Toda women, the sustainable honey gathering of Kurumbas, the gentle millet farming of the Irulas, the durable pottery of the Kotas, these are not to be seen as tribal crafts that just need a market. They should be first recognised as enduring economic practises that they are, and an example of human enterprise that has lasted centuries. If its creators are truly empowered from ground up, they will have a lot more to show the world.

Second, I hope we pursue some important questions: Is there a way to hold on to indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing, not just in the Nilgiris, but elsewhere in the country? What is the need of the moment?

We are probably witness to the last of the generations carrying traditional knowledge. Our younger generations are born into a connected and urbanised world, and the kids from the indigenous communities are moving away from their lands and into the mainstream with little grasp on the legacy of centuries worth of knowledge

and wisdom handed down to them. Therefore, there is an urgent need to find effective ways to preserve the knowledge of that generation.

We can work towards including some of their cultures and symbiotic practises in our mainstream, which will hopefully lead to a homogenous education, nay holistic and more humane education. Why should city children not learn names of local trees, along with names of local heroes? Must they not know what herbs to take for a cold? Instead of grappling with Western education formats, schools in tribal areas could explore ways to include local themes in their syllabus, teach in the native tongue at least at the primary school level, and not alienate Adivasi children from their heritage.



Fig. 64, 65

The stories, knowledge, and worldviews of indigenous peoples answer urgent questions about long-term sustenance, not only of the ethnic communities but the world at large. We could start by learning from them by opening ourselves to other ways of living, and alternative ways of seeing the world.

## Bio

Ramya Reddy has been a professional photographer for over 10 years, drawn especially to blurring lines between physical and imaginary worlds. Growing up in a family with interests in the photography business was an education in itself, but Ramya also studied the photographic arts at the Light and Life Academy, Ooty; Santa Fe Workshops, New Mexico; and Parsons School of Design, New York. Ramya's fine art, travel and editorial work has appeared in renowned travel and lifestyle publications including Conde Nast, Michelin Guides, Vogue, Verve and Elle. She has undertaken commercial collaborations with lifestyle and boutique brands including Taj Hotels, Star TV Asia, Forest Essentials, and Ganjam. Her independent work has been exhibited in India and USA.

In her spare time, Ramya also does photo projects that raise funds for animal welfare organisations. Ramya lives in Bangalore and San Francisco, with her husband and their three native dogs.

[ramyareddy.com](http://ramyareddy.com)

[soulofthenilgiris.com](http://soulofthenilgiris.com)



## Appendix

### Photograph captions

1. Teidili Kuttan, a Toda elder from Melgaars clan looks over the sacred Southwestern ranges, March 2016, *Soul of the Nilgiris*, 66.
2. View from the edges of the southwestern ranges of the Nilgiris in the Mukurthi National Park which drop sharply into the dense rainforests of Silent Valley in Kerala, *Soul of the Nilgiris*, 31.
3. Rangaswamy Pillar rises majestically from among the hills to the east of Kotagiri, above the fertile Moyar valley where the sacred rivers Bhavani and Moyar, which rise high up in the southwestern peaks of the Nilgiris, course their way through the valley to join the Bhavani dam in the plains, *Soul of the Nilgiris*, 29.
4. Early morning view of the mountains from Kotagiri-Ooty road, personal archive.
5. Ancient Rhododendron overlooking the Kundah ranges, Mukurthi national park. December 2006, *Soul of the Nilgiris*, 58.
6. Forest cover, Longwood Shola, Kotagiri. *Soul of the Nilgiris*, 48.
7. Kurinji bloom, Dolphin's Nose, Coonoor. August 2018. *Soul of the Nilgiris*, 298.
8. Toda women dance at a Bow and Arrow ceremony (wedding), *Soul of the Nilgiris*, 108.
9. The dairy temple at the ancient migratory hamlet Nyuulln belongs to the Meelgars clan, March 2017, *Soul of the Nilgiris*, 78.
10. The primary priest of Sholur Kokkal. January 2017. *Soul of the Nilgiris*, 205. Kota priests are not allowed to shave or cut their hair during their tenure.
11. Young Toda girl, Kaavyasin at Bikapathy mund. *Soul of the Nilgiris*, 100.
12. The picturesque Kinnakorai, a remote Badaga hamlet on the western edge of the Nilgiris. *Soul of the Nilgiris*, 182.
13. Badaga elder, Kinnakorai. *Soul of the Nilgiris*, 178.
14. Janagiamma, senior Kurumba healer from Vellaracombai. Kurumba women adorn themselves with a pottu—a marking on the forehead, with resin derived from the sacred vengai maram.
15. Janagiamma's pepper harvest.
16. 300 year Rhododendron looking over Nyuulln, the ancient Toda migratory hamlet. *Soul of the Nilgiris*, 82.
17. Ancestor rocks in the shrine of Vellaracombai hamlet, *Soul of the Nilgiris*, 119.
18. A Toda legend tells us that the dieties Kwattien and Teikosh departed from the mortal world to reside in the mountains of Attapadi in Kerala in the Nilgiris Biosphere Reserve. The peak here, commonly known as the Malleshwara peak, is associated with Kwattein. Next to this peak is the hill associated with his consort, the goddess Teikosh. *Soul of the Nilgiris*, 54.
19. Sacred water body and surrounds of Kurumba goddess Teikosh's country in the Attapadi hills. *Soul of the Nilgiris*, 56.
20. Bettalada warrior sculptures, attributed to the Badagas, possibly dating to 11th or 12th century AD, *Soul of the Nilgiris*, 177.
21. Honey hunters at Vellaracombai at work, use smokers made of branches and leaves to dislodge the Rock bees from their hives temporarily, in order to retrieve cliff honey, June 2015. *Soul of the Nilgiris*, 128.

22. While the Kurumbas were feared for their sorcery, they also provided priestly services to the Badagas. Here, the Kurumbas initiate the ceremony at the firewalking festival. March 2017, Jakkandarai. *Soul of the Nilgiris*, 173.
23. Melgaars (Toda clan) clansmen sing and dance after the rethatching ceremony. Songs often describe the setting of the temple: forests, rocks, trees and streams, *Soul of the Nilgiris*, 77.
24. Tilakavathi, from the Kota community in Sholur kokkal styles her hair into a kockot, a traditional knot, as her daughter looks on. *Soul of the Nilgiris*, 203.
25. Kota musicians at the annual Ayyanor-Ammanor festival, January 2017, Sholur kokkal. *Soul of the Nilgiris*, 38.
26. Badaga men in procession at the annual fire walking festival, March 2017, Jakkandarai. *Soul of the Nilgiris*, 182.
27. Kota potters Rajeshwari and her mother Baby at work outside Rajeshwari's home in Sholur kokkal, *Soul of the Nilgiris*, 39.
28. Irula farmer Nanjan's land. As it is with most indigenous communities, the sanctity of land is deeply manifest in the Irula country too. December 2014. *Soul of the Nilgiris*, 223.
29. preface, *Soul of the Nilgiris*, 21.
30. Ibid.
31. A Toda elder, Sudamalli, from Theppekodu mund in the Avalanche area in the south west Nilgiris.
32. Kids at Theppekodu mund. Personal archives.
33. Toda women embroidering at Theppekodu mund. Personal archives.
34. Intricate embroidery done by counting threads on the ubiquitous coarse off-white cloth. Personal archives.
35. Mutsin (late), elder from the Melgaars clan of the Toda community, at her home in Megaars or 'Garden mund' Anthropologists and photographers frequent Toda settlements. One of them gave Mutsin a framed picture of her parents. *Soul of the Nilgiris*, 90.
36. Nature inspired tattoos that adorn Mutsin's hands, *Soul of the Nilgiris*, 94.
37. Mutsin drapes the funerary cloak she was working on when I visited her in November 2017, *Soul of the Nilgiris*, 96.
38. Embroidering is a communal activity, a time to bond, laugh, and be together. Women embroidering at Bikapathy mund, *Soul of the Nilgiris*, 99.
39. Once referred to as the 'Toda cathedral' by the British, the conical dairy temple of Naawsh, popularly known as Muthanad mund (in Badaga) is a site of exceptional sanctity. Goddess Taihkirshi who is thought to have created the Todas is the ruling deity of the Naawsh temple, *Soul of the Nilgiris*, 111.
40. Irula children, Late 2009. Personal archives.
41. Irula farmer Nanjan's organic, multi crop farm in Bangalapadigai, December 2014. *Soul of the Nilgiris*, 222.
42. An Irula farmer's wife and daughter in Bangalapadigai, hard at work prepping their land to sow Ragi. *Soul of the Nilgiris*, 229.
43. Honey harvest, June 2015, vellaracombai. Personal archives.
44. Badaga elder at a banagudi or sacred grove. *Soul of the Nilgiris*, 183.
45. Pudusin and her friend, Bhuvana Rani, embroidering borders for the spine of *Soul of the Nilgiris* book at Bikapathy mund, *Soul of the Nilgiris*, 97.
46. Testing the embroidered borders on the book dummy, *Soul of the Nilgiris*, 98.

47. Testing the embroidered borders on the book dummy, *Soul of the Nilgiris*, 98.
48. Fresh, natural pigments and bookmarks depicting the cliff honey collection, painted by Krishna, the Kurumba artist from Vellaracombai, June 2015. *Soul of the Nilgiris*, 155.
49. Painter Krishna and his assistant at work on the bookmarks at his home in Vellaracombai, *Soul of the Nilgiris*, 155.
50. The finished book, December 2018.
51. The Nilgiri Library, Ooty. *Soul of the Nilgiris*, 292.
52. Rare first editions by British chroniclers in the Nilgiri archives, *Soul of the Nilgiris*, 289.
53. Manuscripts of Badaga records and ballads from Prof. Paul Hocking's collection. Penned by German missionaries Revd Metz and Buhler in the mid 1800's. Personal archives
54. 1906 edition of epic The Todas, by the distinguished English Anthropologist W.H.R. Rivers, *Soul of the Nilgiris*, 290.
55. Author with Prof. Paul Hockings, renowned anthropologist at his home in San Jose, California. May 2016. Personal archives.
56. The author with healer Janagamma at her home in Vellaracombai. August 2015. Personal archive.
57. Janagamma at her home in her traditional attire. Personal archives.
58. The healer's grindstone, *Soul of the Nilgiris*, 144.
59. The healer's hands. The Alu Kurumbas' system of healing, based on community needs over thousands of years, is governed by the laws of nature. *Soul of the Nilgiris*, 145.
60. The author with ladies from the Kota community in Sholur kokkal, March 2017, personal archives.
61. Author with Toda elders from the Melgaars clan, early 2016, personal archives.
62. Baby, her granddaughter Tilakavathi, and great granddaughter, Nisha, during the annual Ayyanor-Ammanor festival at the Kota village of Sholur kokkal, January 2017, Personal archives.
63. Badaga elder, Jakkanarai, March 2017, *Soul of the Nilgiris*, 160.
64. Toda bride Sneha in her wedding cloak, February 2016, *Soul of the Nilgiris*, 105.
65. Southwestern ranges sacred to the Todas from Teshtheri mund, *Soul of the Nilgiris*, 296.