

## *Reinhabiting Kodagu: Coffee, Ecology, and Indigenous Knowledge*

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Replacement of forests with plantations has long been a significant environmental problem worldwide. India has been experiencing massive environmental degradation since The Indian Forest Act of 1878 (Gadgil and Guha 2012), which began clearing huge mountain forests to establish tea plantations in the foothills of the Himalayas in North India, and rubber and coffee plantations in South India. This led to a severe ecological imbalance in the forest ecosystems, injuring the land and marginalizing the indigenous inhabitants who lived on the forest resources. “Reinhabiting California” (Berg and Dasmann 1978) and Bioregionalism (McGinnis 1999) argue that reinhabitation can restore biotic provinces, ecosystems, and bioregions from being pushed into precarious ecological crisis if communities participate in bioregional living. The question is, to what extent can bioregional reinhabitation resolve this ongoing crisis in India? Reinhabiting Kodagu is an ecocritical study that explores this major environmental problem and investigates possible bioregional solutions. Kodagu, situated in the Western Ghats in the state of Karnataka in India, started losing its dense mountain forests to colonial coffee plantations towards the end of the nineteenth century. The environmental degradation, topographical transformation, and biodiversity loss threatened the indigenous ecology and their traditional knowledge rooted in place.

The project is based on my PhD dissertation, “Reinhabiting Coorg: A Bioregional Reading of Kavery Nambisan’s *The Scent of Pepper* and of Sarita Mandanna’s *Tiger Hills*” (2019), which critically studies the subject texts set in mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century Kodagu from the perspective of bioregional reinhabitation. In addition to textual analysis, I draw from ecological and qualitative ethnographic data gathered from my fieldwork. Instead of understanding bioregional reinhabitation only within a literary imagination, I contend that reinhabitation is an action-based practice that aims to restore and maintain the natural systems of an injured land. This model can help indigenous communities rooted in plantation cultures opt for an alternative ecological lifeway. This research, which spans across the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences, opens a dialogue that will set Kodagu as an example for practicing bioregional reinhabitation on coffee plantations.