

Forest Futures: A Feminist Political Ecology of a Frontier Healing System in Kerala

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My RCC Landhaus project is to turn my doctoral thesis titled “Landscapes and Lifeways: A Political Ecology of Agropastoralists in a Forest Frontier in Kerala” into a monograph. The ethnographic study of a forest frontier of Kerala’s Western Ghats sought to study the transformation of agropastoralists into peasants and traditional healers. I studied how hunting and gathering nomadic groups turned into fixed-field cultivators and a peasant class. I also found that the decline in agriculture is accompanied by the rise in non-farm livelihoods, chiefly in traditional folk healing. Lastly, I looked at the institutionalization of traditional healing through a close study of a forest village that has become a hub of healing. This study found that the forests of the Western Ghats and their inhabitants are going through rapid transitions brought by capitalism, internal colonialism, and climate change. My doctoral work investigated this forest transition, the collapse of the forest oikos, and its consequences on agropastoralists through a framework of gender, ecology, and Indigeneity. Agropastoralists and their forest habitats might help us understand our past and our future. The central motif has been human–nature relations. Through studying the storied narratives of the forest dwellers, I sought to dive into local nature, culture, and society. The methodology involved weaving together field narratives and folklore of honey gatherers, swiddeners, and medicine women with the ecological history of the forest. Designed as an ethnographic study, the project combined immersion in the Attappady hills of the Western Ghats with a qualitative study of secondary literature. I documented and researched life experiences, oral history, and myths. I further studied the narratives that emerge from stories, reading photographic images and listening to the music of the Adivasis. I stayed in the Attapaddy hills for close to a year and visited some of the interior forest villages. Combining oral history and people’s life experiences with ecological history, I was able to piece together landscape change. Through a process of human terraforming, this frontier zone of Kerala has turned into a legible landscape and foodscape. The contestations over forestland have intensified with greater capitalization of the forest-frontier landscape, a variegated peasantry, and a large section that continues to depend on a neglected primary sector. Access to the commons has been restricted, and agropastoralists are dispossessed of their foodways. Their traditional healing has, however, got a new lease of life. “*Ootamooli healing*” involves procuring herbs, greens, chiefly plant-based food, but also animal extracts, from the immediate vicinity for both preventive and curative healing. With the failure of farming and spiraling debts, agropastoralists are drawing on their folk healing system as a source of livelihood. As people from the plains are drawn to alternative cures in the hills, their folk healing system which is unrecognized by codified systems of healing has become synonymous with these hills. I ask how this type of traditional healing is meeting the health needs of Adivasis. Here, I delve into the concept of place and analyze how the Attappady Hills are a therapeutic landscape of healing for its own inhabitants. The Adivasis know herbal cures for minor illnesses, and their first line of treatment involves their own herbs. Finally, I ask how their traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) is being institutionalized? In my book tentatively titled “Forest Futures: A Feminist Political Ecology of a Frontier Healing System in Kerala” I study this professionalization of healing. The repository of stories, songs, and folklore are cultural registers and heuristic devices imbued with curative and nurturing powers. In my book project, I seek to bring exciting empirical findings together to investigate concepts of territory, place, and ethics in socio–nature studies.