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Nilgiri Pastoral

While at the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society (RCC), I plan to draft a couple of essays on landscape change in colonial and postcolonial Nilgiris, South India, for peer reviews. These essays could appear as chapters or sections in a book I am also working towards. The book has a working title 'Nilgiri Pastoral' (inspired by Philip Roth's 'American Pastoral'). In fact, the people whose lands and lives I am writing about—the Todas of the Nilgiris—are, according to Anthony Walker, an English anthropologist, one of the most ethnographically engaged with indigenes alongside the Masai of East Africa and Balinese of Indonesia. Ethnography on the Toda is exhaustive. He mentions that much of it relates to work on cultural institutions of the pastoral Toda. These are typically written by amateur and professional ethnographers, and amongst the former, welfare workers whether secular or missionary, military men, planters, doctors, and so forth. And much of such work lies in European and American libraries. Thus, he argues, Indian scholars wanting to study the Toda have a good deal of travelling and reading to do. Before publicly expressing their thoughts on the Toda, potential scholars need to think about what has been written before them. But change, the anthropologist concludes, "is everywhere" and their consequences on social and cultural institutions need to be subject to ethnographic enquiry.

An invitation yes; but an intimidating one nevertheless. I am almost tempted to claim that precisely for this reason, Todas being a much written about people, one needs to "unlearn." For if so much of colonial and postcolonial prose, prosaic, or ethnographic was generated on the Toda—and, one must add, on the aesthetically pleasing grassland/shola ecosystem they once controlled through fire and grazing and whose consequent openness perhaps provided the sensory scope for oriental observation, speculation, and conclusion, then these graziers and their grasslands must be as much a subject of discourse as they were of colonial and postcolonial capitalism and state making. But my rationale to engage with Toda life, land, and livestock has—besides the powerful justificatory phenomenon of change that the anthropologist mentioned—a certain conceptual and methodological basis. And like the pastoral lives of Todas, the basis has been itinerant.

From an environmental sociological perspective I initially sought to understand the origins and consequences of tiger depredation of Toda livestock, their buffaloes (*Bubalis bubalis*), which held material and ritual significance. During fieldwork, I realized buffalo decline followed grassland decline. Colonial and postcolonial land use policies, whether for agriculture or conservation, were responsible for decline. An environmental historical engagement became inevitable. Though the transitional decade (i.e. 1940 to 1950 when the subcontinent "decolonised") intrigued me, my archival excursion got me to the 1920s. As I read up, I realized thought and action during this decade was constituted by war and peace time capitalism, sedentarization schemes shot through with questions of labor, amelioration schemes, conservation conversations on national parks, post-independence socialist economy mandates, and so forth. For a sociologist like me, what I encountered wasn't just a matter of "background" like the sociologist Phillip Abrams wrote, but about treating present engagements and concerns as struggles to create a future out of the past. I am not alluding the "present" as the "now" and the "here" alone, but "colonial and postcolonial presents" also. And, as I sought to understand the motives behind, contexts to, and consequences of such concerns and engagements, I had inevitably entered the realm of historical sociology.

This conceptual and methodological travelogue, then, shall constitute the conversations that I hope to have with colleagues at the RCC. Thematically, my conversations would traverse the RCC's past and present themes of "transformations of landscapes" in broad terms of grassland afforestation or *defragmentation*; "resource use and conservation" in contexts of grassland restoration policy; and "ecological imperialism," in the broad sense of the Nilgiris being a temperate exception to the rule that the project faltered in the tropics.