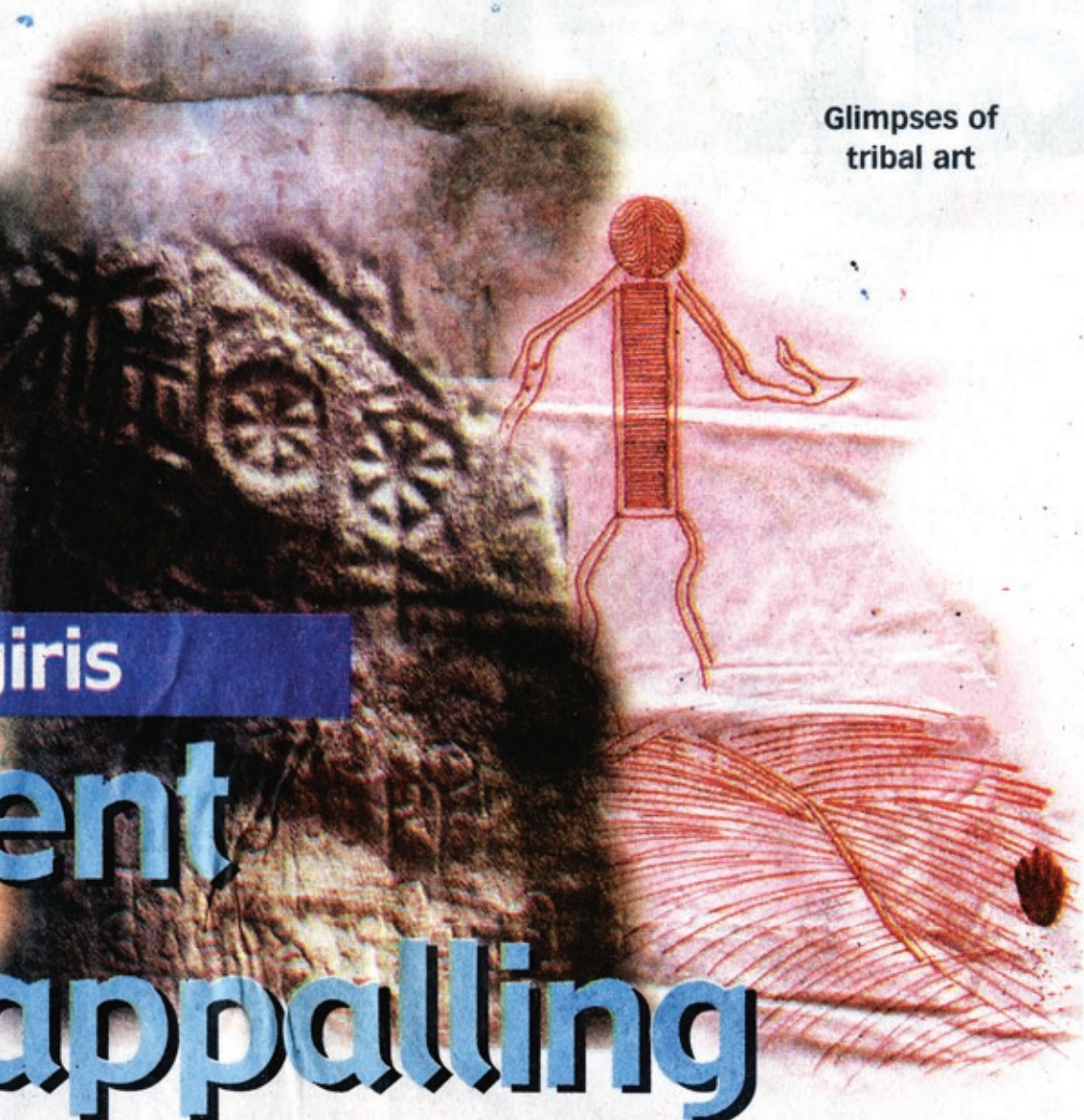




CREATIONS  
Nanditha Krishna



Glimpses of  
tribal art

## The neglect of the Nilgiris

# Government apathy is appalling

I am writing this from Ooty where I have come for the summer, an annual ritual in our family since 1907. But how it has changed! Once upon a time we could see the Stonehouse, home of John Sullivan, builder of Ooty, from our house on Stonehouse Hill. Now there is a PWD eyesore — Anna Stadium. I went for a walk and rushed back home, past a stream of sewage.

Tourism in Ooty is a disaster. Huge buses drive at break-neck speeds on streets meant for horses. The air pollution is unbelievable. In 1997, the C P R Environmental Education Centre did a survey of the ambient air quality at Charing Cross in Ooty and found that it was worse than Mount Road in Chennai. The pavements are teeming with hawkers and there is garbage everywhere, in spite of a very successful campaign against plastics by the Collector, Supriya Sahu.

The few public toilets are filthy, so the visitors use the roads for their physical needs. There are constructions everywhere — lodges, shops, bars and restaurants have come up with no planning, breaking every rule. With the arrival of VIP visitors —

such as the President of India — local people and problems are swept aside as officials take care of these great men of Hindustan! Water supply is neglected, roads are not swept and the traffic becomes even worse, thanks to our zealous security officers. Those who require security should live within their fortresses.

Tourism has destroyed the Nilgiris. The environment has been totally disregarded. Officers come from the plains with no awareness of the importance of the ecology of the Nilgiris.

I am combining a holiday with the organization of an exhibition of paintings by Kurumba tribesmen and pottery and terracottas by Kota tribeswomen. Not many people are aware of the rich cultural heritage of the Nilgiris. In the course of our environmental work, we came across several disappearing traditions. The C P Ramaswami Aiyar Foundation has extensively documented — on paper and on video — the rock paintings of the Nilgiris, the art, craft, music and dance traditions of four Nilgiri tribes and worked with two — the Kurumbas and the Kotas — to develop their artistic traditions to help them generate an

income. In the Nilgiris, each tribe has specific functions, duties and skills that, if developed, could fetch them a regular income and, more importantly, preserve a disappearing heritage.

Civilization dawned in the Nilgiris long before the Tamils held their Sangams. Material finds date back to 10,000 BC, and include sarcophagi and pottery, as well as carvings, writing and paintings. A little-known pre-historic rock shelter at the Edakkal Caves in Wayanad (Kerala) contains mysterious carvings, including a hieroglyphic script. Who made them in these remote hills, and what language do they represent? They will probably rank among the unsolved mysteries of all time.

Ancient (3000 BC) caves under an overhanging rock at Eluthu Paarai in the Kothagiri sector contain well-preserved monochrome paintings in red ochre depicting people, flora, fauna, hunting and daily activities, supplemented by geometric designs and unique stylized forms. Another site with white ochre (or bleached red ochre) painting is found at Konavakarai, with scenes of hunting and honey-collection.

The paintings of Masinagudi are pastoral Neolithic scenes, with figures seated on elephant, tiger, deer and peacock, tempting identification with Indra or Ayyanaar, Ayyappan, Vayu and Muruga respectively. At Iduhatti there are paintings in white (probably bleached red ochre) of honeycombs and honeybees, as well as geometric forms and handprints. The most recent discovery was at Vannanparai, where the paintings resemble those of Masinagudi.

We came across an old man, the last artist of the Kurumba tribe, who lived in the shadow of these paintings. Once a year, during the annual festival, he would paint around the temple doorway and on the walls. His grandson Kitna was taught by our volunteer artists to paint on paper and he, in turn, taught other young men of his tribe. The Kurumbas use the resin of the 'vengai' tree, which gives a burnt sienna colour, for their paintings. It is a fascinating thought that the Neolithic paintings of the Nilgiris may have been done by Kurumba ancestors, which the Kurumbas themselves believe.

In his exhaustive 19th century survey of the Castes and Tribes of

Southern India which includes a documentation of the stories, food, religion, subsistence and other activities of all the tribes of the Nilgiris, Edgar Thurston observes that the front of the Kurumba's houses "is sometimes whitewashed, and ornamented with rude drawings of men and animals in red earth or charcoal," a tradition which has practically disappeared in recent times. Kurumba paintings are no less beautiful or unique than the Madhubani paintings of Bihar or Warli paintings of Maharashtra, yet they lack state support.

The Kotas are the potters, carpenters and blacksmiths, and skilled artisans. Unlike other Indian potter castes, women and men participate equally, although shaping of the pots on the unique clay Kota wheel — the trygann — is done entirely by women. Interestingly, clay images are created not of the deity but as offerings to the deity.

The most exotic and well-known tribe of the Nilgiris is the Toda. They are herders of the very fierce-looking Nilgiri buffalo and are essentially dairymen. They venerate the hills and valleys, rivers and landmarks and the

buffalo. Though their origin has been a mystery, their language, for all its guttural sounds, is undoubtedly Dravidian. Todas are renowned for their intricate embroidery called 'pukuru', used to decorate the 'putkuli', a large piece of double cotton cloth that completely envelops the body.

The Irulas (distinct from the snake and rat catching plains Irulas) make and use musical instruments such as the drum, dwarf pipe, long flute and nagasore when they worship their God Rangaswami. They make glass bead necklaces and brass earrings and anklets, while their ability to plait straw into ornaments is unique. Irulas are famed for their knowledge of herbal medicine.

The Paniyas are the most prolific, yet the most suppressed, the slaves of other tribes and of rich landlords in Kerala and worshippers of Kaatu Bhagavati. They are skilled bamboo workers, making their hunting and other tools out of bamboo and miniatures of the same as toys for their children. I recently received a lovely bamboo pen made by some Paniyas with the help of a NGO. Such skills must be preserved and nurtured.

The Badagas are well educated and modern. They are the traditional landowners and agriculturists of the Nilgiris. Many have joined medicine and other professional fields today. But they too have unique customs and rituals that should be documented.

The tribals are diffident and shy and afraid to fight for their rights or even a decent living. The loss of their lands to tea estates and the forest departments has reduced them to poverty, resulting in alcoholism and declining numbers. More needs to be done for them, but imaginatively. Forest officers teach them to farm with expensive chemical fertilizers and pesticides, destroying the ecology, their health and immunity. Instead of Aavin supplying milk, Toda cooperatives could be formed to supply milk and taught to process the milk into butter and cheese. Kota craftsmanship is exquisite and Kurumba painting is unique. Surely they could be put to good use.

The Nilgiris should be declared a World Heritage Site — they have a unique ecology, ancient heritage sites and a rich tribal culture. We talk of socio-economic justice for the downtrodden, yet we are condemning a once-proud and independent people to poverty, all because they are too timid to protest. Tibetans have been given shops at a vantage site opposite the Botanical Garden, which every tourist visits. But the Nilgiri tribes are denied the same. The apathy and negligence of our governments is frightening. Will we lose this heritage too, like we have lost so many others?

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