

The Wild Flora of the Nilgiris and its Bearing on Humanity

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The Flora in general: The Nilgiris abound in beautiful jungles, the *sholas* as one familiarly calls them, rich in natural vegetation. The vegetation on the hills are partly responsible for the heavy rains on these hills during the monsoon season, the conservation of soil and above all for the beautiful climate of the place. The climate is often compared to an "English summer at its best and is probably the most equable in the world". The flora of the Nilgiris vary according to the different elevations. Lower down we have the tropical and sub-tropical, rich and diversified vegetation made up of a host of evergreen species of Acanthaceæ, Euphorbiaceæ, Guttiferæ, Myrtaceæ, Rubiaceæ, Orchidaceæ and Scitamineæ among other members of various phanerogams. Dense growth of *Ochlandra travancorica*, Gam., are found in many places. Along the banks of streams a wealth of tree forms, tropical ferns, mosses and liverworts abound. *Cycas* representing the Gymnosperms are also quite common. As one goes higher up he is struck with the change in vegetation, the whole panorama now being one of temperate regions, with ferns, liverworts and mosses, the cryptogamic types as well as the phanerogamic types being all of temperate regions excepting a few odd species which are of cosmopolitan nature. The tract above 6,000 feet consists of open grasslands with small alpine plants and bushes besides the naturalised trees as the Blue gums (*Eucalyptus*) and Wattles (*Acacias*). *Rhododendron nilagiricum*, Zenk., with their lovely bouquets of crimson add colour to the existing panorama. The various species of *Rubus*, *Strobilanthus* sp. with their characteristic seasonal flowerings, *Gaultheria fragrantissima*, Wall., the leaves of which yield an oil similiar to that of Canadian wintergreen and the ubiquitous *Lantana* are found along the roadsides and the fringes of evergreen forests. Tree ferns are to be found in the swampy regions near about streams. So also some types of grasses, *Arisaemas* and *Eriocaulons*. In this connection we have to mention that the conifers, several of them introduced, species of *Pinus*, *Cupressus*, *Auracaria* etc. have now become so well established that they grow self-sown in many places. The earlier settlers of the Nilgiris had introduced many valuable plants, not only of the coniferous types but also of the phanerogamic - economic types of which mention

must be made of the wattles, eucalyptus, the potato, coffee, tea, vegetables and various ornamental plants, and the last but not the least, fruits of temperate regions such as the peaches, plums, and apples.

We would suggest the following books for a wider knowledge of the Flora. (1) *The South Indian Hill Stations* - By Fyson (1932) Vols I and II (2) Col. Beddome's account of the Flora of the Nilgiris in the District Gazetteer of the Nilgiris. (3) *Nilgerry Plants* - by Wight. None can at any time say that he has completely exhausted the flora, for the flora of a country are of a changing character just as many other things in nature change with time. It is therefore for the botanists to be working on the flora and see why some have made their exit and others made their appearance.

Present Day Changes in the Vegetation: We find today a good many tropical species that were once very unusual at higher elevations. It looks as if the climate on the hills is becoming warmer due to the vandalism done to the natural flora of the hills so that the species of the tropics are invading higher ranges of the hills as they find them suitable climatologically.

The denudation of the forests that is now taking place for purposes of fuel, for clearing up areas for the cultivation of tea, potato etc., have a destructive effect in the long run. The policy at present adopted is almost like killing the goose that lays the golden eggs. A plea for the preservation of natural parks has been recently raised in our country and rightly too. The wild flora of a country are repositories where one can often find plants closely allied to the domesticated ones. Such wild allies are often of immense use in the improvement of the cultivated ones like cereals, fruit plants, fibres etc.,

One important aspect of economic botany which concerns the hills has to be emphasised here. In all countries Plant Introduction Bureaux are doing valuable service, with a well-established organisation. As already mentioned, some of the earlier settlers of the hills have introduced numerous economic plants, some of them very valuable. It is upto us to take steps to organise a similiar department, so that all valuable plants may be given a fair trial and such of them that get acclimatized grown on a larger scale to improve the prosperity of the country. The Nilgiris is the place for such trial of plants from subtropical and temperate regions.
