

ZOOMING

A lensman's view of the Western Ghats

A FRIEZE of landscape in black and white. Low hillocks, meandering streams, misty waterfalls and thick foliage. Rays of diffused sunlight filter through the canopy, white clouds nestle among jagged peaks, green dunes stretch across huge acres, low grasslands, high precipice, barren rocks and sheer drops. All this and much more are the Western Ghats captured in lens by photographer Ian Lockwood in the exhibition 'The Western Ghats, Portrait and Panorama' displayed recently at the India International Centre. Lockwood is an educator, photographer and environmentalist with a passionate interest in South Asia. He has a message to deliver. "New Delhi is a long way from the Western Ghats. Yet many of the country's important decisions are made here. I hope from these pictures people will learn about this important natural treasure," he says.

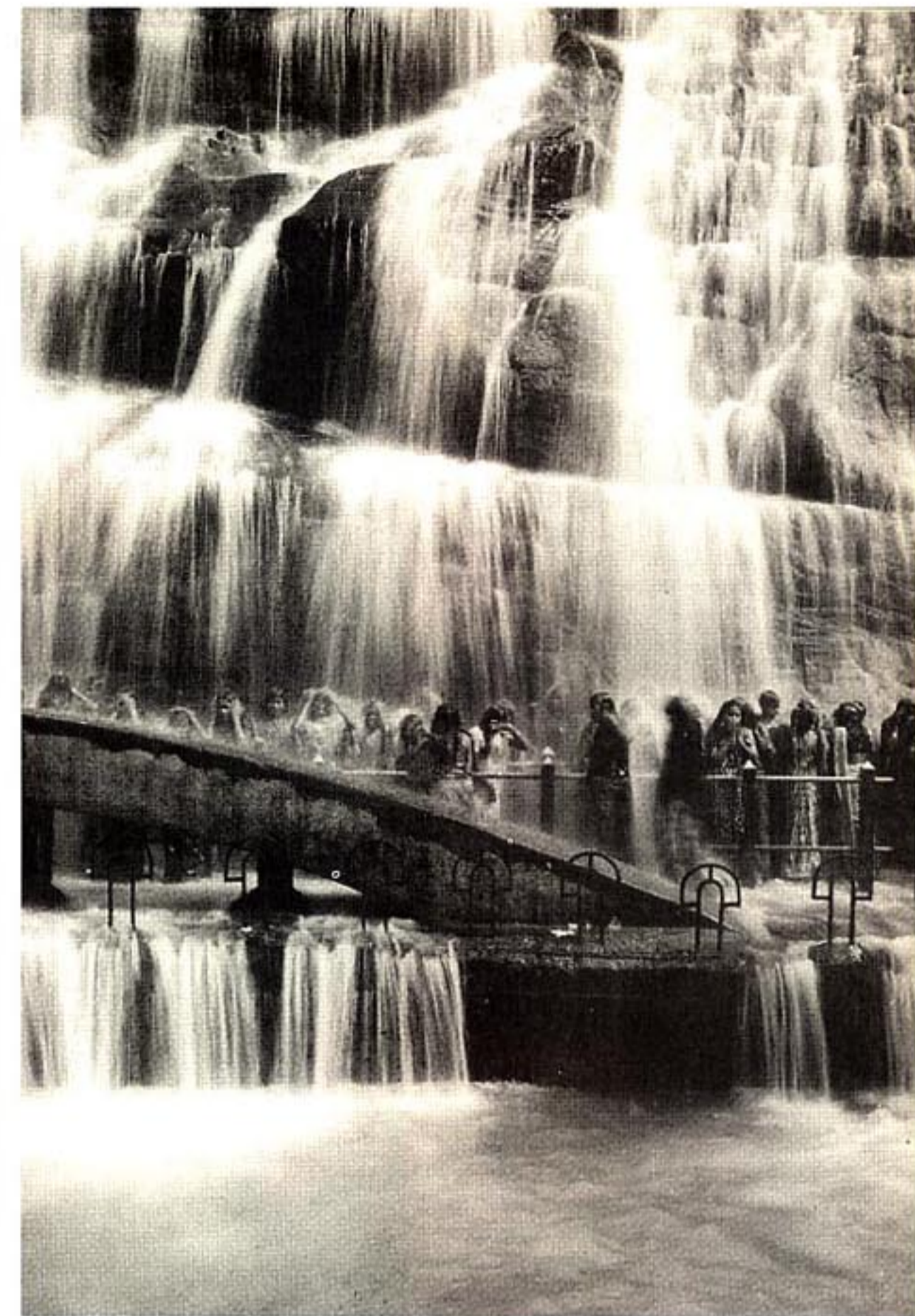
With visitors streaming in to take a peek of his daguerreotypes, the exhibition seems to be a success. "The Western Ghats as a rainmaker and biodiversity hotspot is vital to India and a critical asset. It needs better protection



and more can be done to help preserve it for future generations," feels the photographer. And towards this end he has been working for the past few years now. Armed with three different medium format cameras, Lockwood paints an artist's impression of the Western Ghats.

An old dilapidated temple is set in shades of grey and black with a giant shola tree in the backdrop. Titled Mangla Devi Ruins, the shot gives an

impression of both life and death as the living tree takes up most of the old degenerated temple. Shot in 120 film, which is slightly larger than the usual 35mm, Lockwood captures the small details and tries to do justice to the incredible landscape that he has had the fortune to witness. A panoramic camera with a rotating lens allows him to take some interesting wide-angle images as in the spectacular vision of rolling hills and wild grassland set amidst the dark,



A photographer tries to educate Delhi about the Western Ghats

marching monsoon clouds that are so real that you can almost hear them rumble.

Lockwood's other camera a Mamiya Range finder 6x6 produces square format pictures often associated with portraiture and studio photography.

"I like using it in the field and always present my work with the entire frame," he says. One of the frames is of a eucalyptus plantation with the tall willow trees set in shades of black and grey.

The Bombay Shola Cemetery is yet another interesting shot with a variety in composition. The camera focusses on a shola tree, a recurrent theme in most of the exhibits, set amidst a cemetery

with sunlight streaming through. Electric poles at the right of the frame complete the picture of wild abandon with vestiges of civilisation. Shot in Fujica 6x9 rangefinder, the picture is an interesting study of light and shadow.

While making a statement on the conservation status of the Western Ghats (one shows plastic bags and cans strewn on the grounds of a national park), Lockwood seems to have focussed more on the flora than the fauna. "My main themes are habitat, water and biodiversity in the Western Ghats. I do have a few close ups of ferns, environmental portraits (people and their environment) and there are one or two wildlife shots. One is of a Nilgiri

tahr in Eravikulam National Park and one is of a domestic elephant. They help round off the exhibition, but in no means am I trying to tell the complete wildlife story in this particular exhibition," says Lockwood.

However, he reserves most of his wildlife shooting for colour. "The wildlife is a very important element in the story of India's Western Ghats. However, I feel that one should not try to do too much in one exhibition. My focus with these black and white pictures is the landscape. On a very basic level, I feel that I take better landscape and portrait pictures than I do wildlife shots," he admits candidly.

Brought up in Dhaka where he also



works as a teacher of environmental science and photography, Lockwood spent his childhood living, studying and exploring the wild of both Bangladesh and south India. His parents came to work as volunteers in Bangladesh soon after the war of liberation.

His earliest memories are from Madhupur forest, a moist deciduous forest in north Bangladesh. "My passion was riding my father's motorcycle, looking for birds, capped langurs and other forest creatures," he says. While initially it was Ian's father, Merrick Lockwood, and Ansel Adam who influenced his photography, later on, Ian worked with Rom and Zai Whitaker who formed an indelible impression on the young mind. "When I was in high school and in trouble for some prank I had played, I had the good fortune to go out on several trips with Rom and Zai. They have been key influences on me taking my personal passion and trying to make a living from it," he says. On the conservation efforts in Western Ghats, Ian believes it is quite good. "I speak from the point of view of being a wandering artist rather than someone deeply involved with conservation work," he says. "I have had the good fortune to meet many remarkable people working to protect the Western Ghats. People working in different State forest departments, researchers at the Wildlife Institute of India and the Indian Institute of Science Bangalore as well as BNHS and other NGOs. There are also many citizens not connected with any larger organisations," he says.

However, there are ongoing concerns in the Western Ghats that leave little room for complacency. Industry is interested in mining prospects in places like Kudremukh National Park in Karnataka. There are bureaucrats who would like to make more large dams. In hill stations like Kodaikanal and Ooty, township people are looking to expand. Many reserve forests adjacent to wildlife sanctuaries and national parks have yet to get full protection. Estates have encroached on protected areas and several key wildlife corridors have been broken by expanding estate and commercial activity. Most of the original forest inhabitants have little say in their role in the protection of the forest and this remains an issue mired in controversy, feels Lockwood. ■

