

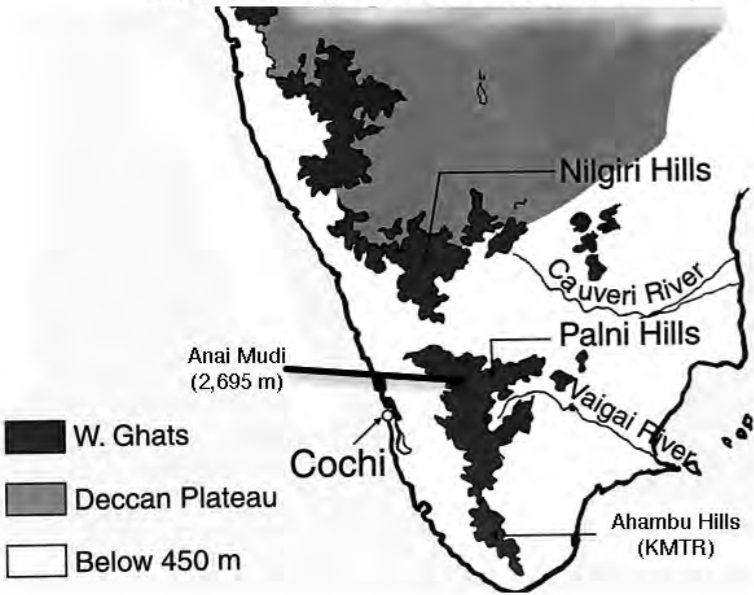
Southern Sentinel: Anai Mudi & the Palni Hills



All photographs taken and submitted by Ian Lockwood

Ian at Inaccessible Valley

The Southern Western Ghats (With special emphasis on Anai Mudi & The Palnis)



When we were students at KIS a highlight of the traditional 80-Mile Round was having lunch under the summit of Vandaravu. The peak is not remarkable as a mountain but it has a superb view into Kerala and is the highest point in the Palni Hills. On clear days one looks out over the multi-colored canopy of Pampadam Shola into the eastern valleys of what is known as the High Range. Several prominent peaks, glazed in native grasslands, rise above the lower valleys of shola forest, tea and eucalyptus. Older generations of Kodaiites knew this area as Travancore and the now dilapidated forest bungalow below Vandaravu once hosted numerous Kodai class camping trips. Frank Jayasinghe, then KIS Principal and the Sri

Lankan students made their heroic escape over the pass at Vandaravu to Kerala. As students in the 1980s we were under the erroneous impression that Vandaravu at 2,553 meters was the highest mountain in South India. I realized that I had been misinformed when I was poring over Survey of India maps in the gloom of an Ohio winter soon after graduating from Kodai. The maps were antiques, surveyed before the First World War. They had belonged to my grandfather and then been passed on to my father who had attended KIS (1959). Both of them had hiked extensively in the hills prior to the large-scale introduction of tree plantations that dramatically changed the landscape of the Palnis. The maps clearly showed that the peaks around the tea-planting town of Munnar were significantly higher than the Palnis. Little did I realize that visible from Vandaravu is South India’s highest peak, Anai-Mudi.

Anai Mudi, at 2,695 meters, is a peak of significance and rugged, untarnished beauty. Contrary to claims about Dodabetta in the Nilgiris (2,625 meters), Anai Mudi is India’s highest point south of the Himalaya. Many high peaks in the Western Ghats have ended up as base-stations for TV transmitters, gaudy tourist structures and dull plantations (think of Vembadi Peak now). Thankfully Anai Mudi was ignored by generations of planters, developers and others who might have changed its character and appearance. For many years it was part of a private “game” sanctuary owned by the Finlay Tea Company. The High Range Club of Munnar bears testimony to these years of hunting. Its “gentlemen only” bar is crammed with skins, trophies and artifacts of hunting exploits in the high hills. During these years the other high altitude plateaus with similar habitats (notably the Palni and Nilgiri Hills) were almost entirely carpeted in non-native



Nilgiri Tahr and kid

tree plantations. Thus by the end of the 20th Century Eravikulam retained the largest undisturbed shola/grasslands habitat left in the Western Ghats! Several decades after India’s independence the sanctuary was taken over by the Kerala government and established as Eravikulam National Park in 1978. The tea planters (now under the auspices of Tata Tea) still take great

pride in their role in protecting Eravikulam. One of the interesting facets of Anai Mudi is that it hosts the world’s most secure populations of Nilgiri Tahr (*Hermitragus hylocrius*), the endangered endemic mountain goat for which KIS’ hiking award (The Tahr Pin) is named. Nilgiri tahr are connected to a genus of



mountain goats that once stretched from the Arabian Peninsula to the Himalaya and south into the Western Ghats. Changes in climate and physical features have left only three species in the genus, the Arabian (*H. jayakari*), Himalayan (*H. jemlahicus*) and Nilgiri tahr. A formidable distance separates Nilgiri tahr from their nearest neighbors, the Himalayan tahr. Interestingly if you inspect a the Tahr Pin closely, it resembles the Himalayan rather than the Nilgiri tahr! The Nilgiri tahr are agile ungulates that feed exclusively on the native high altitude grasses of the southern Western Ghats. They use the precipitous granite cliffs that are a feature of the hills as protection against predation from leopards, *dhole* (Indian wild dog) and tigers. The entire population of Nilgiri tahr is thought to be no more than 2500 individuals in the wild. Half of these are in Eravikulam and there are no tahr north of the Nilgiri Hills. Tahr are exceedingly difficult to see in

the Palnis where habitat change and poaching have almost wiped them out. In fact, I would venture to say that precious few Tahr-Pin winners have ever seen a wild tahr in its natural habitat!

Aside from Eravikulam, there are small populations of tahr in the Nilgiris, Anaimalais and even as far south as the Ashumba Hills near Kanyakumari. Dr. George Schaller, the renowned zoologist, conducted one of the first studies of Nilgiri tahr in Eravikulam and the Nilgiris (see his book *Stones of Silence* for an excellent write up). Schaller’s work was followed up by Clifford Rice who conducted the seminal study of tahr in Eravikulam in the early 1980s. Rice has old India links: originally from the United States his father graduated attended Kodai and Woodstock Schools. Cliff was born in Madhya Pradesh, and he graduated from Woodstock School in 1968!

For people familiar with the Palni Hills, Anai-Mudi and Eravikulam holds a special significance. The peak has a similar volcano-shaped profile to Perumal Peak when it is viewed from the north. One of the earliest descriptions of the Anai Mudi area comes from Douglas Hamilton, the British hunter and surveyor the Palni and Anaimalai Hills in the 19th Century. His lucid sketches depict a Kodai without eucalyptus trees and a lake. Many of the sketches were printed in the *Eucys* of the 1970s and they have been used in this magazine (Johnny Riber photographed an original set of 26 drawings from the Raja of Pudukotai). Hamilton wrote glowingly of the Palnis and especially liked the Berijam area, which he proposed as the main “sanitarium” in the Palnis (look for “Fort Hamilton” on Survey maps to see his preferred spot). His hard-to-find book *A Record of Sport in Southern India* (1892) provides one of the most evocative descriptions



Hamilton Plateau

of the undisturbed high altitude plateau areas of the Western Ghats:

“The views from this mountain are the grandest and most extensive that I have ever beheld; some of the precipices are of stupendous magnitude and the charming variety of scenery, comprising undulating grassy hills, wooded valleys, rocky crags, overhanging precipices, the green fields in the Valley of Ungeenad (Mayayur Valley), the grand mass of the Pulnies beyond and the blue ranges (Nilgiris Hills) in the far distance present a view beyond my power to describe and must be seen to be appreciated; in a word the scenery in the Annumallays is surpassingly grand and incomparably beautiful. On our way to the Kartu Mullay (the second highest peak in Eravikulam) we disturbed several herds of ibex (Nilgiri tahr), which as they bounded amongst the crags and precipices, added greatly to the effects of

the grand and wild features of the country we were passing through.’

Today Eravikulam is significant because it retains the vegetation, wildlife and feel that the Palni and Nilgiri Hills once had before they were developed into a hill stations. Of course the conversion of the marshy basin into Kodai’s star-shaped lake and wooded hill-station is beyond our memory. However, the large scale planting of the upper Palnis happened between the 1960 and the 1980s, a time still familiar with many of us who hiked these areas during our school years. This largely unrecognized tragedy happened right under our noses and we have been slow to adequately respond to it. KIS’s hikers of the 21st Century have to work quite hard to find undisturbed vegetation in the upper Palni Hills. Priest’s Walk and Perumal have small patches of grasslands (soon to bloom with kurinji flowers). There are pockets along the cliff section of the 80 Mile

Round, near Ibex Peak (the second highest point in the Palnis). The ridge above Kukaal Shola offers one of the largest undisturbed patches of grasslands and is actually a part of the larger Indira Gandhi Wildlife Sanctuary (mainly composed of the neighboring Anaimalai Hills, an area contiguous with the High Range).

Visiting Eravikulam and Anai Mudi is a tricky business because it is a National Park under very strict supervision. Its is nearly impossible to get permission to visit the Core Zone and my advice is to write Kerala’s Chief Wildlife Warden for written consent long before you visit. The tourist zone gives you a hint of the place and is certainly worth a visit if you are in Munnar (now a very popular tourist destination). This relatively small hillside lies on the way to the Rajamalai Estate under the southern shadow of Anai Mudi’s awesome granite walls. Several generations of tea planters have maintained



salt licks that keep the tahr coming down from the mountains. Thus you are guaranteed a tahr sighting and there are other highlights if you can avoid the late morning hordes of tourists. It is not uncommon to see herds of 100 or more tahr in the tourist zone! They are abnormally docile and approachable here. There are other wildlife sightings opportunities in this area. I have witnessed herds of elephants in the tea, observed a super rare Nilgiri Marten (*Martes gwatkinsi*) near a shola and spotted most of the endemic shola birds near the

entrance (I'll save the details for a separate article).
On my last visit to Eravikulam I spent a week participating in the 2002 wildlife census. I had the good fortune of being assigned the Anai Mudi zone, which meant climbing its summit and the neighboring peaks repeatedly during the seven days of the census. Accompanying a friendly but quiet Muduvan (the indigenous tribal group of the High Range) watcher named Palnisami, I got to know the peak well. I had fabulous sightings of tahr in the

wild (very skittish and not at all approachable) and was able to take some interesting pictures of the landscapes. I enjoyed long hours on the peak scanning the expansive grasslands and scattered shola pockets for signs of large wildlife. On one clear morning I could clearly make out the nearby Palnis Hills as well as the more distant Nilgiris across the Palghat Gap. The microwave dish near the Observatory, the Berijam fire tower, Kukaal's tiny temple and Cloudland's Peak were all recognizable through my binoculars. Vandaravu and the



Kattu Malai view of Anai Mudi

western boundary of the Palnis was a deep azure shadow. By then I had learnt that Vandaravu has the highest motorable road south of the Himalaya, a significant, yet easily confusable fact for a Kodai teenager!
Ian Lockwood
The Overseas School of Colombo
Pelawatte, PO Box 9
Batramulla
Sri Lanka
94.1.864.920
highrangephoto@yahoo.com

Related Links & References
Eravikulam Management. www.Eravikulam.org
Hamilton, Douglas. *A Record of Sport in Southern India*. 1892
Nilgiri Tahr Trust www.tahrfoundation.com
Schaller, George B. *Stones of Silence*. Bantam Books, 1982.

IAN LOCKWOOD (Class of 1988) teaches Environmental Science and Geography at the Overseas School of Colombo in Sri Lanka. He previously taught at AIS/Dhaka and the Mahindra United World College of India (near Pune). He and his family continue to visit Kodai and the Palni Hills on a regular basis. Ian is working on a long-term project to document the little known landscapes and biodiversity of the Western Ghats. His work is regularly published in Indian magazines such as *Frontline* and *Sanctuary Asia* and he hopes to have a book on the Western Ghats published in the next five years.