

Tribal Culture In Nilgiris

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ABSTRACT

Nilgiri district is one of the smallest districts in Tamilnadu. Etymologically the word Nilgiri means Blue Mountain. The Scheduled Tribe population in Nilgiri district is not evenly distributed in the six taluks. In Tamilnadu, among the 36 scheduled tribes, the government of India identifies six communities as Primitive Tribal Groups. Important among them are Todas, Kotas, Kurumbas, Irulas, Paniyas and Kattunayakans. The Nilgiris is the home of three major Dravidians tribes namely the Todas, the Kota and the Kurumbas. The Badaga form the largest ethnic group in Nilgiri District and they were originally a migrant group from Karnataka who arrived in the highlands in the 16th century. The Toda are the original inhabitants of The Nilgiris Hills and they are one of the most picturesque tribes in India. The Todas actually possess some Patrilineal and matrilineal divisions they were undoubtedly polyandrous. The Kotas inhabiting Nilgiri district within a cultural frame work and they are strict followers of their culture. Kurumbas are the least civilized group in the district and they mostly live in the hill slopes and feverish places. In Nilgiri district, Irula are found in the lower regions of the hills. The Paniyas usually avoid marrying their cross cousins. Monogamy is the most common form of marriage, among Paniyas whereas, polygamy form of marriage is also found in few settlements in the district. The social organization of any society involves mutual relation obligations, elements of idea behavior anticipated behavior and accrual behavior of the community members. Their priests are of their own tribe. There are two to a village one called Devadi, whose office is hereditary. No animal sacrifices are performed there. They do not know the difference between Siva and Vishnu. However, describe the Irulas as a distinct and no peaceable tribe. There is a repertoire for dancing, a repertoire for funerals and a repertoire for 'god'. Tribal people are endowed with enriched traditional wisdom to use available resources around them.

Key Words

Tribal Population, Badagas, Todas, Kotas, Kurumbas, Irulas, Paniyas, Tribal Culture, Social Organization, Social life, Birth and Marriage Ceremony, Religious Life, Music

Introduction

Nilgiri district is one of the smallest districts in Tamilnadu. Etymologically the word Nilgiri means Blue Mountain. According to the 2001 census, the total scheduled tribe population in this district is 25,048, which constitute 15.98% of the total tribal population of

the state. But in 2011 census, the total population of the Nilgiri district is 7.64 lakhs peoples out of which the total Scheduled Tribes population was 28378, constituting 4.32 percent of the total general population. The Scheduled Tribe population in Nilgiri district is not evenly distributed in the six taluks. 32.08 percent of them live in Pandalur taluk; 24.10 percent of the tribes live in Kundha taluk; 9.27 percent of them live Udagamandalam taluk and remaining 6.96 percent live in Coonoor taluk.

In Tamilnadu, among the 36 scheduled tribes, the government of India identifies six communities as Primitive Tribal Groups. Todas, Kotas, Kurumbas, Irulas, Paniyas and Kattunayakans. All these six Primitive Tribal groups live in the Nilgiri district. Among them four Primitive Tribal groups, Todas, Kotas, Kurumbas and Paniyans live exclusively only in the Nilgiri district. The other two Irulas and Kattunayakans live in Nilgiri district as well as other districts of Tamilnadu. The above-mentioned tribal groups along with the Badaga community are considered as indigenous groups of the Nilgiri district. Kurumbas and Irulas call their village *Motta*, Toda-*Mund*, Badagas-*Hatti*, Kotas-*kokai*.

Tribal Population

The Dravidian tribes of Nilgiri areas are observed to have special skills used for the benefits of the whole community. They are found complementing one another in various ways. The Collier's Encyclopedia describes on that as: Kotas serve to the other tribes as artisans; the Todas specialize in raising buffaloes, the Kurumbas, noted for their power as sorceress, have a hunting economy and acts as priest and musicians for neighboring tribes; the Badagas are farmers who rely upon neighboring tribes for their implements and for musicians and witch doctors; and the Irulas, like the Kurumbas are hunters. The Nilgiris is the home of three major Dravidians tribes namely the Todas, the Kota and the Kurumbas. There are other tribes also found in these districts.

Badagas

The Badaga form the largest ethnic group in Nilgiri District, numbering around 200,000. They were originally a migrant group from Karnataka who arrived in the highlands in the 16th century. Traditionally agriculturalists, they have assimilated and adapted to technological change and new forms of cash crop agriculture, making them the most economically secure ethnic group. Many Badaga have succeeded as small-scale tea cultivators, they tend to be better educated and many are now employed in the civil service and in urban economic sectors. Badagas although far the most numerous, not being an aboriginal or jungle race, which will be devoted to an account of the primitive tribes, and to the rude stone monuments, of uncertain origin, which are found in various parts of the plateau. The Badagas are Hindus, chiefly of the Saiva sect, and are supposed to they emigrated to the Nilgiris from Mysore, about 300 years ago, after the breaking up of the kingdom of Vijayanagar. They are an agricultural race, and cultivate various cereals of rather a poor sort.

They hold their hands under government at very easy rates, and of late years many of them have acquired considerable wealth, an own large herd of cattle. They pay a sort to tribute, in grain, to the Todas; their language is a corrupt form of Canarese. Their individual socio-economic, socio-cultural mainly characterizes the tribal groups who are exposed to various environmental stresses and socio-biological set up. Hence, the health of these tribal groups is as such a function of the interaction between socio-cultural practices, genetic characteristics and the environment conditions.

Todas

The Toda are the original inhabitants of The Nilgiris Hills and they are one of the most picturesque tribes in India. Classically described as Patriarchal, the Todas actually

possess some Patrilineal and matrilineal divisions they were undoubtedly polyandrous. The Todas believed that they were the original inhabitants of the hills, and have attracted a high level of anthropological interest since W H Rivers' renowned ethnographic account in 1906. They predominantly occupy the high altitude grassland areas at the top of the plateau, mainly in Udagamandalam taluk. Traditionally Toda life and religion was centred on herds of sacred buffalo whose dairy products provided the main means of survival. These buffalo were kept in the Toda mundsor hamlets for the majority of the year, but during February to May the buffalo were taken to the Kundah area to access fresh pastures before the monsoons.

Over the last fifty years this rotational grazing practice has almost ceased with the more static settlement of Toda people, and their growing adoption of agriculture. Since the 1882 Madras Forest Act, the Government has reserved certain forest and grassland areas as for Toda needs; these are known as Toda patta lands. Toda people have rights to live, graze their cattle and to undertake cultivation in these lands on the basis of permits granted by District Authorities. Pulpwood plantations occupy some patta lands. The profits from these, under the Social Forestry scheme, are supposed to be split 60:40 between the pattadar and the forest department.

Kotas

The Kotas inhabiting Nilgiri district within a cultural frame work and they are strict followers of their culture. Both monogamy and polygamy form of marriage is practiced among them but most of Kotas prefer monogamy. Polyandry is not prevalent among the Kota people. Traditionally the Kotas were an artisan group skilled in carpentry, metalwork and pottery as well as producing other crafts and music that they exchanged for foodstuffs from other tribal groups. Today the Kota live in seven settlements at an elevation of about 1800m MSL in Udagamandalam and Kothagiri taluks, and many are now small-scale agriculturalists

on patta lands that have been allocated to them. Compared to other tribal groups, the Kota are comparatively well educated and economically secure, with some holding positions in the civil service and non-government sectors.

The hunter-gatherers that mainly live in forested tracts between an elevation of 1200m and 1500m in Kothagiri taluk. However there has been much recent debate over whether these groups should be considered as entirely separate ethnic clusters. Previously the Kurumba were entirely reliant on forests for their livelihood, exchanging forest products, in particular honey, with other tribes. Today honey still forms a significant part of Kurumba income, though it is now traded on a cash basis rather than exchanged. However, most Kurumba are now engaged in agriculture and those who do not own lands work as casual agricultural labourers. Many Kurumba are amongst the poorest of the population of Nilgiri District.

Kurumbas

Kurumbas are the least civilized group in the district and they mostly live in the hill slopes and feverish places. Alu Kurumba, Jenu Kurumba, Betta Kurumba, Urali Kurumba and Mullu Kurumba, each group maintains different ethnic social organizations and social designs based on their living habitats. All these five groups follow endogamy to regulate their marriage systems and cross-cousin marriage is practiced except for Mullu Kurumba. They follow monogamy form of marriage. Polyandry is forbidden, but polygamy is a status symbol.

Irulas

Irulas the second largest scheduled Tribe in Tamilnadu. In Nilgiri district, Irula are found in the lower regions of the hills. Irulas strictly follows community level endogamy i.e., marrying within their own community. They also prefer cross-cousin consanguinity.

Monogamy is the common form of marriage. Polygamy is sanctioned but polyandry is strictly forbidden. Irula people were also traditionally a hunter-gathering group inhabiting the forest edges at similar altitudes to Kurumba peoples, and they were also engaged in the collection of forest products. Although today forest products still provide some income on a seasonal basis, most Irula are casual agricultural labourers, either on the plantations or for livestock owners. Some are engaged in agriculture on patta lands that have been conditionally assigned to them, where tea, coffee, jack trees and fruits are cultivated. But these lands are small and of poor quality and income from these lands have to be supplemented with paid labour.

Paniyas

The word 'Paniyan' means 'servant' in both Malayalam and Tamil. They are the traditional farm laborers for Chetty (landowners) Property Owners. They do not easily mingle with other tribal communities of these areas. The Paniyas usually avoid marrying their cross cousins. Monogamy is the most common form of marriage, among Paniyas whereas, polygamy form of marriage is also found in few settlements in the district. However, polyandry form of marriage is completely absent in Paniyan society. Levirate form of marriage is prevalent in both male and female. This somewhat feudal system was recognised as a form of bonded labour, and under the British as well as post Independence some efforts have been made to break these bonds and rehabilitate Paniya in various schemes. After independence many Paniya took up work as casual agricultural labourers or plantation workers, however although most are now not working under bonds Paniya people remain particularly poor and uneducated.

Tribal Culture

A culture that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, moral, law, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.

Culture also includes all the elements in man's old endowment that he has acquired from his group by conscious learning or by a conditioning process – techniques of various kinds, social and other institutions, beliefs and patterned modes of conduct. Marriage is universal form that has been accepted by all. It varies from culture to culture and people to people. The commonly known forms of marriage are monogamy, polygamy, and polyandry.

Social Organization

Social organization is the network of relation existing among individuals and groups in a society. The social organization deals primarily in social organization of any society, mutual relations, obligations elements of ideal behavior, anticipated behavior and actual behavior are all included. Generally, the tribes form a small community of their own in particular territory. Their relations are direct and intimate. Their organization is commonly seen in their social design. In Nilgiri district, Irulas are found in the lower region so the hills. The social organization of any society involves mutual relations, obligation elements of ideal behavior, anticipated behavior and accrual behavior of community members. Thus, social organization is the network of relations existing among individuals and groups in a society.

The Toda society is a Petri lineage a descent group whose membership is based upon a rule of patrilineal descent. Patrilineal decent is a cultural principle that automatically affiliates childbirth through his Male Ancestors. As per the Toda custom, the Toda women belonging to Theveiol avoids visiting to the Tharthazol. The restriction is said to be due to the fact that on one occasion a Theveiol women, on a visit to a Tharthazolmund, folded up a cloth, and placed it under her putkuli as if was a baby. When food was served, she asked for

some mote food for the child, and on it, exhibited the cloth. The Tharthazol, not appreciating the mild joke, decided degrade all Theveiol women. Even today, though the Todas belonging to Tharthazol are eager to visit to the women belong to *Theveiol*, the Theveiol avoid visiting the *Munds* where Tharthazol live. Toda women take part in agricultural operations, tend cattle, collect fire, and fetch clean water. They participate in economic activities and observe rituals. The different life cycle rituals that are observed vary in details with groups and particlans. A pregnant woman is symbolically separated from the household during her pregnancy, as it entails pollution the bow and arrow ceremony, a symbolic recognition of the social paternity of the child, is performed before the delivery. Despite the disappearance of polyandry, the observance of this ritual has persisted as a cultural survival. Traditionally the Toda pastoral, but of late about a quarter of them have taken up commercial agriculture, particularly the cultivation of vegetables like potato and cabbage. A few of them have leased out their land in lieu of a fixed amount of money payable at the time of the harvest.

Social life

The social organization of any society involves mutual relation obligations, elements of idea behavior anticipated behavior and accrual behavior of the community members. Thus, social organization is the network of relations existing among individuals and groups in a society. The Kota society is a partilineage descent group whose membership is based upon a rule of matrilineal descent is a cultural principle, which automatically affiliates a child at birth through his male ancestors. As with other tribal societies, Kotas do not have separate social divisions based on territorial or occupational levels. However, Kotas have a unique social feature of *keri*(street) system that regulate their marriage alliances. *Keri* in Kota dialect literally means a street. According to Kota informants, since quite a few Kota persons in each settlement bear similar names, it is easy to identify a person when the name of his or her

keriis prefixed to this name. Thus, the social organization has developed among the Kotas in such a way that, a *keri* corresponds to a clan, and the members of a *Keri* itself has become a social grouping of kinsmen.

Birth and Marriage Ceremony

During a woman's pregnancy, the husband leaves his hair and nails uncut. Three houses built for women to occupy after the birth of children, or at other times when they considered unclean. Immediately after birth, the mother, and child are removed to the first hut, a temporary erection of bough called *vollogudu*, from *vollu* inside and *gudu* nest, where they remain for thirty days. The second and third months are spent in two permanent huts called *telulu*. A woman with her first child, on leaving the *vollugudu* for the first *telulu*, must make seven steps backwards among seven kind of thorns strewed on the ground. Some Kothagiri, however have only the *vollugudu* in which the women remains for a month, and her treading on thorns takes place, when she leaves the *vollugudu* to return home. This is *Mamul*, no other reason is of course discoverable. On leaving the second *Telulu*, the mother generally goes to a relative's house for three days; if this is not convenient, she returns home.

Purification Ceremony

Her husband purifies the house on her return by sprinkling it with cow-dung and water. On the seventh day after this, a feast is given to the relatives; the child is fed with congee and the paternal grandfather names it. When a boy is from 15 or 20 years old, his parents ask in marriage for him some girl of six or eight. If her parents' consent to the betrothal the boy with his parents goes to their house, salutes the girl bowing his head and clasping their feet, and presents them with a *Birianhana* of gold and ten or twenty rupees amongst well-to-do Kotas some jewels are presented to the girl at this time. This ceremony is called *bali med -deni*, from *bali*, bracelet, and *med-deni*, when the girl becomes of age, she is

sent at the request of the boys relations to his father's house, a feast is given with music, and the bridegrooms mother ties on the *tali*, in this case a silver necklace made by Kotas. In some places the bridegroom goes to the bride's house and presents there with the *tali*, two *madigeor* brass armlets, and a *Bali* or bracelet. The Kotas marry only one wife, unless she should be barren, when they may take another. In this case, the two wives live in the same house. Widows may remarry. Kotas profess to have no traditions of any kind. They even pretend ignorance of the story of *Koten*, though it is evident from their manner that they do know it. Some declare that they were born on these hills, others that the inhabitants of each Kothagiri came from a different part of the neighboring plains.

Religious Life

Traditional Todas cosmology identifies two worlds: that of the living, ruled by the goddess *Tokisy*. There is no conception of an eternal Hell, but those who have led unmeritorious lives are said to suffer many indignities before they too eventually reach the other world. Pilgrimage to Hindu temples, Todas religion finds ritual expression principally in the cult of the sacred dairies and their associated buffalo herds. Buffalo are categorized as secular (the mainstay of the traditional economy) or sacred (with several gradations). For the latter, ritual surrounds every task of the dairyman: herding, milking, churning, and preparing ghee (clarified butter) from butter, as well as seasonal or occasional activities such as burning the pastures (now discontinued), naming a buffalo, giving salt to the herds, driving them to dry-season pastures, and rethatching or rebuilding a dairy building. Dairies, which Todas themselves identify as temples, are buildings kept in a state of ritual purity so that dairymen-priests (of comparable ritual purity) can process inside them the milk from associated herds of sacred buffalo. Ranked in a hierarchy, each grade of dairy has its associated grade of

sacred buffalo and dairy man priest. The higher the grade of a dairy, the greater is the need for ritual purity and the more elaborate the rituals that surround the daily tasks of the dairyman. They are following of Vishnu under the name of Rangaswami (peak). On the top of Rangaswami's peak they have two temples consisting of circles of rough stones, each enclosing an upright stone, the larger called Dodda (great) among the smaller Chikka (little) Rangaswami. The latter has not been longest up; they say he was but lately born. In addition, Irula Poojari lives near the temples, and rings a bell, when he performs Puja to the gods. He wears the Vishnu mark on his forehead. His office is hereditary, and he is remunerated by offerings of fruit and milk from Irula worshippers every year about sowing time there is a large feast at the temples, which is attended by the Badagas of the surrounding district, who bring offerings of plantains and milk to propitiate the Irula god. No animal sacrifices are performed there. They do not know the difference between Siva and Vishnu. However, describe the Irulas as a distinct and no peaceable tribe. At all events, there is no reason to suppose that they were ever anything but a jungle race, and it is that they have no traditions of their own.

Religious Rites

Their priests are of their own tribe. There are two to a village one called Devadi, whose office is hereditary. If the family fails entirely, recourse is had to inspiration for the choice of another. The Devadi appoints the second. Neither lives in the temple; they cool food before it at the feast of *Kamataraya*, and distribute it to the householders, sow and reap the first handfuls of grain at the proper seasons, and make the first obeisance other corpse at a funeral. The devadi is liable to be possessed by the deity. Generally, they recognize but one god, under the name of *Kamataraya*, and his wife, each represented by a thin silver plate.

Traditions say of Kamataraya that perspiring profusely; he wiped from his foreheads three drops of perspiration and out of them formed the three most ancient of the hill tribesmen the Todas, Kurumbas, and Kotas. The chief Kota festival, however is the annual feast of Kamataraya, called Kamabata or Kamata. This lasts for about a fortnight. On the first evening, the priest lights a fire in the *swami* house, and then brings it to the principal street of the village where it is kept up during the whole of the feast. On the second day no work may be done, except digging clay and making pots but no particular ceremonies take place on this or the three following days. On the sixth day men are sent to fetch bamboos and rattan, and on the seventh day the two temples are newly thatched and decorated; it's essential that this should be accomplished before nightfall. The eighth and ninth days are spent in feasting. Contribution of grain and ghee are demand from the entire neighboring Badaga village and cooked in the enclosure of the temples. Only boiled grain, ghee and a sort of pea soup are eaten on this occasion. A portion is laid before the temple, then the priests eat and afterwards at the rest of the villagers all sitting in a row before the temple. The tenth day is passed in dancing the Kotas dress up to the occasion wearing the long robes and borrowing jewels of all sorts from the Badagas, who are obliged to propitiated their artisans by attending and contributing on this occasion.

On the eleventh day, they decorate themselves with leaves, tie buffalo horns to their heads, and go through various appropriate pantomimes. The women also dance at this feast only; they sing at the same time, which is an improvement on the drum and horn accompanied of the men's dancing. On the twelfth day they make a fire inside their temple, by drilling a pointed stick round and round in an hole in a piece of wood, bring a bit of iron, and go through the form of heating and working it up by way of asking '*shastras*' and say to the god, "let all be well and prosper."

Music

Instrumental tunes or *kol* of the Kotas differentiate, mark and partially constitute ritual occasions. There is a repertoire for dancing, a repertoire for funerals and a repertoire for 'god'. Each is characterized by broad stylistic features, but the criteria for distinction between repertoires are to a greater extent contextual and singular (piece by piece) than they are musical. Within each repertoire, a particular tune may be associated with a particular action (in a funeral, for example, one tune is associated with lifting and carrying the bier to the cremation ground). In general, the ways in which the structure of instrumental melodies co-articulates with ritual structures can be analyzed as a system of indigenous classification in and of itself. One of the two basic rhythmic patterns, each of which may be elaborated in different ways, accompanies melodies. Unlike the complex rhythms performed for various occasions by *Paraiyaror Cakkaliyarensamble* on the plains in Tamil Nadu, rhythms performed by Nilgiri tribes are not used to differentiate ritual occasions—although they do differentiate dances.

Conclusion

Tribal people are endowed with enriched traditional wisdom to use available resources around them. They are well versed in the usage of plant for treating various diseases. They have used powder or extract or paste form of the plant parts such as root, shoot whole plant, fruits and leaves etc., the recipe known by the tribal people was passed on only to their family members and community. Hence the knowledge is confined to particular people alone. The Toda tribe can identify plant species that are used for the treatment of fever, asthma, cold, cough, diabetes, diarrhea, dysentery, eye infections, stomach ache, wounds and snake bite. But these skills they do not use it for income earning purpose. The Government of Tamil Nadu has classified the Badagas as educationally and socially backward community.

but not as a tribe. Their language is a mixture of Tamil and Kanada. The Village Council of the Badagas is considered to be advanced than that of the other tribal communities.

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