



Anthropological Study On Toda Tribes Of Blue Mountain, Tamil Nadu, India

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Abstract: The mountainous region of Nilgiris is not only well-known for its lush greenery and marvels of nature but also for its wider in-depth exploration of its traditional and cultural values of different tribal community. Blue Mountain has been the ancient dwelling place for indigenous tribes like Kurumbas, Irulas, Todas, and the Kotas. These tribal communities are widely scattered and have diverse culture and practices. It is evident that these tribal communities belong to the Dravidian ethnic group, as their language has the Dravidian imprint and is similar to the languages of Tamil, Malayalam and Kannada. Out of the other four tribes of Blue Mountains, it is believed that Toda people own a rich heritage. This article presents the cultural heritage of Toda people and recommends extending support to Toda people to maintain their traditional values.

Keywords: Toda community, Beehive hut, Grasslands, Buffaloes, Rituals

Introduction

Nestled in the bluish-hued hills of Blue Mountain, the indigenous Toda tribes manage to be intact with their dwellings. The places they reside in are known as mundhs - (the settlement) of Toda people. There are close to 65 mundhs, namely Karsh mund, manjakal mundh, mulli mundh, ullikali mundh and so on. There are 80 mundhs in Ooty taluk, 8 mundhs in Kotagiri taluk, 6 mundhs in Kunda taluk, 1 in Coonoor taluk and so on. Apart from these mundhs, they have 5 migration villages. Therefore, Todas are spread across the Blue Mountain. The hamlets of the Toda tribe are surrounded by lush grasslands and trees which provide them an inherited delight in wandering through these beautiful grasslands with their buffaloes.

In early times, Toda people were dwelling in beehive shaped houses which were made of bamboos, cane and reeds. A mundh encompasses five to six huts. It is mandatory for a hamlet to have two or three dairy buildings, a separate buffalo pen and a calf pen. One remarkable structure of the Toda beehive hut is that they have a small front door in order to protect themselves from the wild animals, so they have to bend themselves to enter the house. It is also believed that they bend as means of paying respect to their land. Toda hamlets have taken a different form, as they have started constructing houses made of tiles and stones. However, people can still find a

few old style houses in ullikal mundh and mulli mundh which have been the oldest munds of their ancestors.

Presently, the population of Toda is approximately 1800. In 1930's there was an epidemic in Nilgiris where people were affected by diarrhea, fever and cold. To save the Toda people from the disease, a European woman named Ms. Link took some Toda people to her place that was a few kilometers away from the mundh where she treated them with medicines. After the treatment, some people stayed with Ms. Link and as days passed by, close to 40 families were converted to Christians and from then on they are called as Christian Todas. The place where Christian Todas live at present is called as Toda colony. Though Christian Todas sustain friendly relation with the Todas, they never follow or celebrate Toda rituals and ceremonies. At present, there are close to 500 Christian Todas in Toda colony. There are many doctors, teachers and other professionals among Christian Todas.

Toda people have an exotic way of dressing unlike the other people of the Nilgiris. Women and men wrap a white veshti (dhoti) and an embroidered shawl, called putkolli, over their body. The Toda tribes of Nilgiris are known for their art of embroidery. They purchase white cloth materials from Erode, which is approximately 150 kilometers away from Ooty and they design these materials with unique embroidery styles to reform it as their traditional shawls (putkolli). These shawls feature the distinctive images of kurkur (flower) and tress. It is essential that this material has to be embellished with the combination of three colours, namely white, black and red as a practice of their custom. The white colour symbolises innocence; red depicts opulence and black represents sadness. There are a variety of designs of putkollis known as torvohor, peervohor, archakvohor, modheevohor and vanki. Putkolli are worn by Todas only for ceremonies in recent years, whereas they used it all the time in their ancestral days. Indeed, they also make extra putkollis, sweaters and scarfs to sell it to the foreigners that help in generating income revenue. The rate is fixed based on the designs and patterns. Besides draping the putkolli in a different way, they also groom it in an exceptional fashion.

Women carry two plaited ringlets; they make these ringlets with the help of curd which have been their key food ever since the birth of their culture. Toda people tattoo their legs and hands as part of their custom. Mostly, their ancestors have been barefooted. Nevertheless, the young girls of the present generation have started using slippers and they carry a common hairstyles. As they have to adorn themselves with what they can access within their land, they have been powdering the dry flower of the Gogil plant and use the powder as a bindi. They wear ornaments made of bronze (venkalam) like Kahoth- neck chain, pull- bangle, etc as they consider this metal as precious and this metal has been used ever since the birth of their ancestors.

The livelihood of the Toda tribal community is based on the buffaloes they possess. Their main occupation is herding of buffaloes over the grasslands. It is believed that the prosperity of the hamlet is judged by the size of its buffalo herd. The Toda people raise buffaloes for their economic benefits. Besides raising buffaloes, they have also started investing their time in agriculture and have transformed many munds (settlements) into agricultural fields as the number of buffaloes decreases day by day. They cultivate vegetables like potatoes, carrots, beet roots, cabbages and variety beans, namely seneca bird, polloff bean, pole bean, cornbread and so on.

From the early historical times to the present day, Toda people have a deep spiritual and religious connection to their land and to their main diety Teskesh. They believe their diety created the buffaloes and the grasslands for the buffaloes to graze. Toda community believes that their life does not exist without the presence of buffaloes with them. Todas never eat the meat of buffaloes and they never kill their buffaloes when they become old, they take care of them until they reach their heavenly abode naturally .Toda community states that they feel a strong positive vibration and presence of positive sensitivity in their land which is why they walk barefooted in their grasslands as a means of paying respect to it. The importance of presence of buffaloes is widely reflected in their oral history, myths and rituals. The priest in the temple says loudly the names of all grasslands, mountains sacred buffaloes in order seek blessings from their deity for the prosperity of their community.

Vasamalli, a woman of the Toda community reports to TOI in 2018: “Though our community is very small in number, we cannot say our dialect is endangered. It had been surviving throughout our ancestor’s time and it will till Nilgiri exists.” She also added that their language is an ancient mixture of Kannada, Tamil and old Malayalam. The prayer songs are mostly related to nature. Below is the song sung by them every morning before milking the cow.

Moij adumu
Kaiirmo karmos
May it be well
May clouds rises
May rain fall

The Toda community has become more cultured than in the past in terms of marriages and ceremonies. In the olden days, the community followed polyandry, where a woman who gets married to the first son of the family becomes the wife of the other sons, if any, in the family. Marriage ceremonies are performed in a simple way, even without the mangalsutra in the Toda community unlike the other communities of Nilgiris. Firstly, an agreement is made between the two families. Secondly, the bride grooms family except the mother of bridegroom goes to the bride’s house to invite the bride to their family. The mother of bridegroom waits for the daughter in law to come

home and to light the lamp as lighting of lamp is considered as messenger to their deity. Finally, the bride seeks blessings especially from her mother-in-law after lighting the lamp. Therefore, the blessing of mother-in-law is considered to be the marriage that establishes the bond between the bride and the bridegroom's family.

Followed by the marriage, both the families wait for the bride to get pregnant, for only after she conceived does, Vilambu Shastra takes place, in which the bridegroom gives the confirmation message to the community that the baby and his wife belong to him by performing by presenting a bow and arrow (Vilambu) to his wife. In other words, Vilambu Shastra is a practice in which the bridegroom has to make a bow and arrow from a specific plant named ipursh. It is believed that Lord Rama, the seventh avatar of the Hindu God Vishnu, pierced this particular plant with his arrow, which is why this plant is used to make bow and arrow. After presenting the villu ambu (bow and arrow) to his wife, the bridegroom confirms that the baby belongs to his clan by mentioning the name of his clan. There are 16 clans, namely noshan, Omarsh, Thevagh and so on. To end the Vilambu Shastra, a lamp is set in the jamun (*Eugenia jambolana*) tree and it is lit by the bride. Having lit the lamp, it now becomes the responsibility of the bride to see to it that this lamp keeps burning until it blows off on its own. Followed by vilambu shastra, the couple bends down and the elders bless the couples, not with their hands but with their feet. If the bride does not conceive, Vilambu shastra will not be celebrated but the bride stays with the bridegroom unlike olden days.

Vasamalli, a Toda woman who has been giving her views to the researcher Dr M.Saraswathy, says that "in early days, if the girl is not able to conceive, she is sent to her parents' house and the bridegroom gets married to another girl in the mund. But, these days, the Toda community has become civilised enough in the sense that the couple start leading their lives together even if the woman does not conceive. Girls are privileged to choose their husbands within the mund. In case they get married to someone from another community, they are considered to be clanless-Todas. Men rarely get married to the other communities compared to women.

The temple of the indigenous Toda tribe is irreplaceable in its structure. It is a fact that each settlement has one temple. The temple is rainbow shaped and was earlier built with wood and grass. However, approximately 50 years before, the Toda community reconstructed their temples with stones as there was scarcity of grass. Their hereditary temple is called Moonba and they believe that their Goddess Tekesh has created them. They also trust that it is their Goddess Tekesh who has created the buffaloes for their survival. They worship Goddess Tekesh in the form of nature. The priest of the temple performs pooja in the mornings and in the evenings with the sacred buffalo milk. The milk of the sacred buffaloes is churned especially to light the lamp in the temple of Goddess Tekesh.

The priest has to stay in the temple for three months and he is not supposed to visit his hut, even though it is close to the temple. He is supposed to prepare sacred food (prasatham) with the fire sticks in and around the grassland and has to serve sacred food to the community. As their hamlet is surrounded by thick forests, the priest can be accompanied by a young boy in their hamlet during night times. But the young boy is not permitted to enter the inner room where the lamp is lit; he is supposed to stay in the outer room. Women are not allowed in the temple; even men have to pray from outside at least 10 feet away from the temple. As a part of their culture, they celebrate a temple festival once in a year in Karsh mundh, which is their main mundh accompanied by the buffaloes. In addition, many rituals are performed to shift the pastures seasonally.

There are a variety of myths as to the origin of the buffaloes of Toda inhabitants. It is believed that a god named "Ennd" came with his wife to the Blue Mountain and brought 1600 buffaloes with him, and his wife brought 1800 buffaloes with her. It is also thought that there was a honeycomb in the deep hills that was broken. The honey flowed down the slopes to quench the thirst of the buffaloes and this river was named as pykkara, which is even now a very popular spot among the tourists. According to the myth, it is from the last buffaloes that god Ennd created, - a man, and he was the first Toda man, which is why buffaloes play a major role in the Toda community. It is mandatory to have a few sacred buffaloes in their hamlets and these buffaloes are milked only by the priests in the temple. On the other hand, the ordinary buffaloes can be milked by other men in the community. In olden days, almost all the buffaloes were sacred, they use the milk of sacred buffaloes for their food as well, but as passed by, Toda community decided to have 4 or 5 sacred buffaloes for a mundh and started to sell the milk of other buffaloes to milk-cooperative societies nearby for their economic benefits. They sell their male buffaloes calves for their economic benefits. They make their living by selling the milk and the milk products to the dairies outside their mund.

Also women can milk non-sacred buffaloes (putir) and can go inside a buffalo pen (putir lu). Toda women have a distinctive style of churning the milk to make ghee and butter.

Women play a major role in the Toda community. It is said that after-sunset, if there are no women in a particular mund, the entire people of the mund have to vacate the place and move to a different mund. They can return to their mund only after performing pooja in the temple on the next new moon day. Prior to this pooja, a baby girl has to clean the temple with scotch grass and she has to carry the dust in her dress. Only then the priest is supposed to perform the ritual. In the early days, even grandmothers were the heads of the settlements.

Problems Faced by the Toda Community

Women are still far from achieving their wishes and goals though they hold degrees like Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Commerce, and Master of Science and so on as they are not exposed to the outer world.

Men have been showing less interest in attending schools, as they have pre-conceived notion that their lives must be associated only with rearing of buffaloes like their ancestors.

Women and men getting married to other communities are never reunited with their maternal family and they are excluded from all the rituals and ceremonies in the community.

Most of their grasslands are planted with trees; so it has become difficult for them to breed and feed their buffaloes. They migrate their buffaloes to a different mundh during the dry season for three months and they come to their own mundh when the rainy season begins.

Some munds remain with no transport facility.

Toda community says that at the time of British rule in India, they gave complete ownership to their mundh and to their grazing land as well. But at present, even if they want to convert their mundh to agricultural land, they have to seek permission from the government.

Toda women are concerned about recent research articles which state that the community still follows the polyandry system. Vasamalli, who is a B.Sc. graduate, denies this and says that the polyandry system is abolished.

Toda ritualistically slaughter a sacred buffalo and place the body of the deceased near the buffalo head as they believe that the last breath of the Toda must go along with the last breath of buffalo to reach the heavenly abode. Nevertheless, there is a great decline in the number of sacred buffaloes and also non-sacred buffaloes. Altogether there are only 1000 buffaloes now in 65 munds. They are in need of funds to raise their buffaloes.

Measures taken to solve their issues

Many awareness programs and workshops have been conducted to safeguard their language. They can also claim funds from the government to safeguard their language. They published a book called Enduring Voices that has 50 stories and 50 songs in their language.

Government has been taking steps to help the community to protect their culture and pastures. But Toda say that it becomes difficult for them to lead their life in their own land as the government does not allow them to pay the tax though there is ownership document for both their Toda mundh and their grazing land.

The Government provides them with enjoyment certificate that helps them to avail from the bank loan for their agricultural business. They are also permitted to graze their buffaloes outside their mundh. Sometime their buffaloes goes to Kotagiri to graze which is a few kilometers away from their mundh.

The central government has started a school named TRC for all the six tribal communities in Ooty.

Their association (Todar Yerumai Madu Sangam) has built a buffalo pool in order to help their community as the buffaloes are killed by the tigers very often. The pool is named as Panjai Pandavar Yerumai Mandh Sangam between 2002 and 2018. They are yet to renew for the year 2020.

The government provides them with a certificate named Enjoyment Certificate that helps them to avail loan from the bank for their agricultural business.

The other people of Niligiris treat the Todas equally and they maintain friendly relationship with them. They also visit their mundhs and the Todas give a warm welcome to their mundh to the other people Nilgiris as well.

Conclusion

In conclusion, in India the Toda community is one of the emblems of human diversity; they astound the society with their mythology, knowledge and long history. They protect nature as part of their culture. They say that the Europeans did not invade their grassland rather helped the Toda tribe to protect it when they ruled India. Europeans considered Toda tribe as an asset to the Blue Mountain. Despite being in contact with the expanding frontier society for more than 100 years, Todas still take great efforts in maintaining their culture and in preserving their language. It is said that Toda tribe is known as the first inhabitants of the Blue hills and therefore, it becomes the responsibility of other people and the Government to work as catalysts in the development process of these Toda tribe.

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