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A remote Toda hamlet, Kwehh(r)shy.

STEWARDSHIP

The Toda People: Stewards of Wilderness and Biodiversity

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"At a period when humankind appears to be so disconnected with nature that they assume their species can survive without respecting other forms of life, it might be pertinent to see how a traditional Toda mind is trained to interact with nature."

The Todas are the oldest inhabitants of the Upper Nilgiris plateau in south India, having lived there since ancient times. With their quaint barrel-vaulted temples and houses, their richly embellished cloaks, and their splendid long-horned buffalo, the Todas have fascinated the world ever since "civilization" stepped into the Nilgiris two centuries ago.

Both the Todas and their beloved breed of buffaloes are restricted to the Nilgiris. Their culture revolves around these herds, with each of the six grades of dairy-temple having its corresponding herd of sacred buffaloes. Only a man who has become a dairyman-priest, following the elaborate ordination ceremonies specific to each grade, may milk the corresponding grade of sacred buffaloes and, incorporating an array of rituals, process it into butter, buttermilk, curd, and clarified butter. Although they have been coerced to take up farming quite recently, these people are buffalo-herding pastoralists traditionally.

Figure 1 - Location of the Nilgiris in India. Photo by Tarun Chhabra.

Figure 2 - Dairyman-priest at temple. Photo by Tarun Chhabra.

The Todas are one of the very few indigenous cultures who chose to tread the path of vegetarianism. Undoubtedly, this has added a unique dimension to the way they relate to their natural surroundings. Their pastoral way of life, low population (1,450 orthodox community members), combined with their nonmartial, nonhunting, pacifist, and vegetarian lifestyle has surely played a significant role in ensuring the survival and prospering of the flora and fauna that surround their settlements. The Todas' intimate link with nature is one of the factors that has endowed the Nilgiris with such a high degree of biocultural diversity. It is a fine tribute to this people and to the values they espouse that their homeland in the Nilgiris has become the heart of India's first biosphere reserve.

Naturalistic People

At a period when humankind appears to be so disconnected with nature that they assume their species can survive without respecting other forms of life, it might be pertinent to see how a traditional Toda mind is trained to interact with nature. Not surprisingly, the Toda relationship with surrounding nature begins with their birth rituals. The neonate is a passive participant, but the mother is required to handle several specific plant species to validate the ritual activity. A few weeks thereafter, during the infant's naming ceremony, the grandfather uncovers the child's face outdoors for the first time, pointing out to the child various elements of the natural environment: the rising sun, the birds, the buffaloes, bodies of water, sacred rocks, hills, and so on. In all likelihood, the child will be named after one or another of these surrounding natural phenomena: for a girl, perhaps it will be a flower, a bird's feather, or a precious metal; for a boy, the name might incorporate the sacred name of a specific rock, water course, swamp, hill, or shola forest within the vicinity of the child's natal hamlet.

A Toda learns several regulations related to her/his sacred environment from an early age. For instance, there may be a flat rock at ground level along the path to their hamlet that they must scrupulously avoid treading upon every day. There are other pathways they know that only a priest may traverse. They come to understand that some freshwater sources are reserved for dairy-temple-related use only by the priest, others for the ordination rites of a priest-elect, some for drawing water specifically for the salt-pouring rites that occur periodically for the buffaloes, and yet others for cooking festive food during temple-related ceremonies. They discover that some plant species can only be handled by a dairyman-priest associated with a corresponding grade of temple, while others are meant only for certain sacred rituals. They know that after incurring the polluting effects associated with a funeral, they must not venture toward any sacred area in that landscape.

They are told that some peaks are the abodes of gods who are the ruling deities of their clan and that they must salute them with reverence. They know that any alteration in the ecosystem around a deity hill is an indication of profound sickness of the environment. They realize that the sacred rivers must be treated with reverence and should only be crossed in a state of ritual purity. They also come to know that there are some temple complexes of such sanctity that the entire ecosystem in its immediate vicinity is treated as inviolate. Beside the temple, the surrounding thicket, grassland, waters, flora, specific rocks, pathways, buffalo pens, hills, and other landmarks are all considered sacred. One must approach such an area in a state of purity and walk barefoot. Even answering nature's call is prohibited. Even today, sacred Toda areas maintain a healthy ecosystem and resultant microclimate, insulating them from extraneous effects such as those of global climate change. As an example, when we were searching for one of the rarest of endemic Nilgiri orchids, *Liparis biloba*, it was a pleasant surprise to rediscover it growing at a remote Toda hamlet, Kwehh(r)shy.

Before becoming a dairyman-priest, a man is informed of the rules associated with that temple grade. He knows the specified thorny species that an ordained must collect on the day he becomes a priest, along with the bark of an exceptionally sacred tree that no lay Toda is allowed to handle. He has observed that fire is to be made only by friction, by twirling the sticks of another sacred tree, and this is used to light the temple lamp. The firewood used for the dairying and cooking activities within the temple is collected only from specified species. Even the kinds of plants used to sweep the sacred areas are stipulated. When he partakes of his sacred fare around the temple complex, specific leaf plates and a bamboo vessel are to be used. It is advantageous to have all such floral species available in close vicinity so that his valuable time is utilized in performing priestly duties. One of these might involve a specific rock on which he has to pour freshly drawn sacred milk. The list goes on. At every level, the connection with nature is inseparable for a Toda, and what is essential and sanctified must be protected.

The Toda relationship with nature continues until death, as all rites of passage entail the use of numerous species of flora that cannot be substituted. Therefore, it is expedient to have all these scores of species growing naturally around all hamlets so that the lifetime ceremonies may proceed unhindered. For example, the rituals of pregnancy and those for determining the paternity of a woman's offspring entail the use of the following plants: *waadr (Arundinaria wightiana var. hispida), ƙawƙwehdd (Nothapodytes nimmoniana), peh(r)shƙ (Rhododendron arboreum subsp. nilagiricum), pell(zh)ƙoddc mhill(zh)y (Rubus ellipticus), ƙwaddky (Myrsine wightiana), ƙaihh(r)sh (Syzygium densiflorum), pudhoorr (Sophora glauca), narrƙh (Cymbopogon polyneuros), and paw(r)sh ƙwehdry (Pentapanax leschenaultii).*

Figure 3 - Drinking from special leaf cups at pregnancy rites. Photo by Tarun Chhabra.

It is worth mentioning that the pregnancy rites occur during the darkness of a new moon night and thus a long walk to a distant forest to collect the required plants is not practical.

The Todas produce marvels of architectural beauty and robustness. Among first societies of the world, the Toda people have been recognized as architects par excellence. It has been hypothesized that the Toda conical temples could represent the prototype of the *vimana* (the conical or pyramidal tower built on Indian temples, just above the sanctum) of ancient south Indian temples. Both their barrel-vaulted and conical structures can last for well over half a century, requiring only periodic rethatching (not a single nail is used).When they decide to rebuild a dairy-temple, only specific kinds of natural raw materials may be employed for building the barrel-vaulted and conical temples. This has meant not only protecting such vital resources but also understanding their unique properties. Thus, they understood that the thin *tef (Pseudoxytenanthera monadelpha)* bamboo has high tensile strength and used fresh bent bunches to give the structure its characteristic barrel-vaulted shape. Similarly, they realized the unique properties of the rare and endemic wetland grass, *avful (Eriochrysis rangacharii)*, and used it to thatch their dairy-temples. These structures can last for decades provided the occupant has lit the fire within the building regularly, thus exposing it to smoke. This causes the natural constituents to bind into a single cohesive unit, and it is observed that traditional structures emit minimal smoke into the atmosphere.

Figure 4 - Priest at Konawsh conical temple. Photo by Tarun Chhabra.

Figure 5 - Lashing bunches of tef. Photo by Tarun Chhabra.

Since the natural materials used in the construction of dairy-temples cannot be substituted, the Todas learned how to maintain them. The rattan ties used to bind each layer of the roof to its higher zone are conserved by allowing the mother plants to regenerate before being harvested next, and the thatch grass is propagated by understanding its resistance to fire, and thus ritually firing the wetland periodically to allow this vital species to regenerate rapidly. Ever since this activity has been proscribed by the government, this grass that is endemic to only the western Upper Nilgiris, has become endangered, and the Todas now have to journey to distant corners of the plateau searching for it. If it disappears in the future, not only will they be unable to thatch their temples, but a vital grass species will become extinct. A study that was commissioned to determine the causes for decline of this species found that firing of such wetlands, that were unlikely to catch fire naturally, greatly reduced the number of competing genera, especially forbs, which tend to dominate in disturbed swamps (Chhabra, Mohandass, and Puyravaud 2002). Ironically, it also showed that the more disturbed swamps had the highest levels of biodiversity, with more than 70 different species present in some bogs. But in this case, the increase in diversity did not indicate a better health of the wetland but rather the converse. The problem has been compounded by the planting of exotic trees such as eucalypts and wattle from Australia on adjacent hillsides.

Since the Todas have proven botanical and ecosystem management skills, it seems apparent that sound environmental policies for the Nilgiris should rest at least partly on Toda traditional ecological knowledge. The Convention on Biological Diversity, to which India is a signatory, specifically declares in Article 8: "respect, preserve and maintain the knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous communities."

For example, when a study on *avful* was initiated, flowering specimens were sent to an expert in the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew for necessary identification. Todas, on the other hand, can readily distinguish specimens from other similar-looking species even at a distance, whatever may be the phenological condition. Therefore, traditional Toda plant taxonomy clearly does not require plants to be in a flowering condition for identification. Elders can identify and name close to 400 floral species in the hinterland.

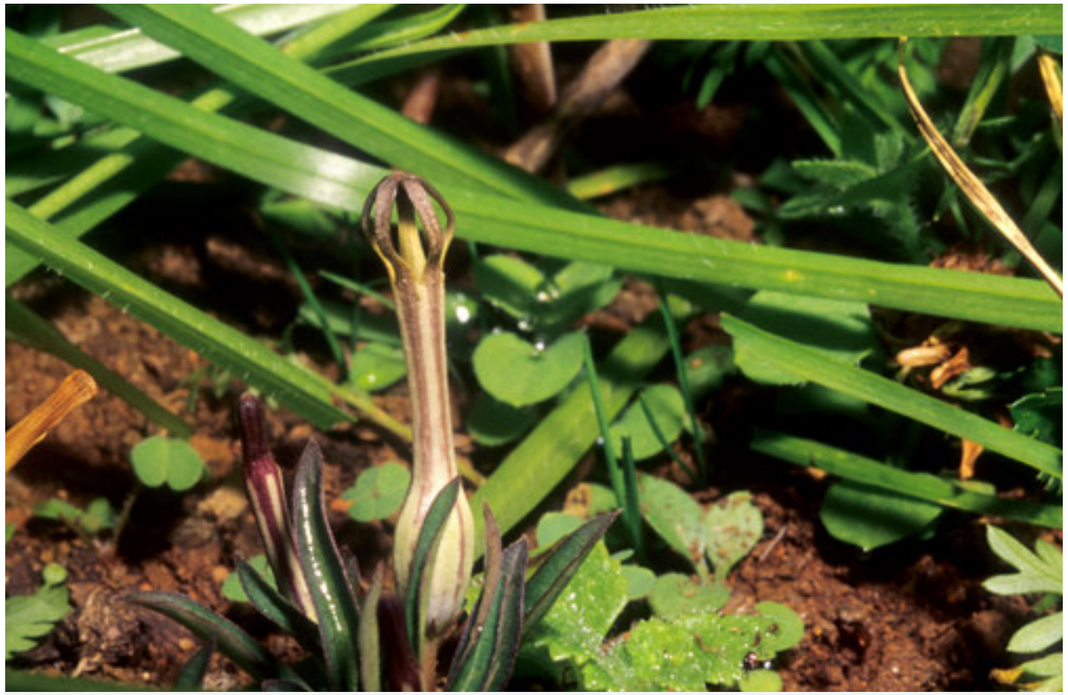

Figure 6 - The churning-stick flower. Photo by Tarun Chhabra.

Sacred Nature as Inspiration

The Todas have used nature as inspiration for their daily life. Their barrel-vaulted houses and temples are said to have been inspired by the shape of the unusual miniature rainbows seen here, their buffalo pens by the circular pattern of a clump of *eihhmehr* bushes *(Gaultheria fragrantissima)*, and even their unique cane milk-churning stick is modeled on the *kafehll(zh)* flower *(Ceropegia pusilla)* that has an uncanny resemblance to a miniature churn stick. They also recognize a flower called *arkilpoof*, the "worry flower" *(Gentiana pedicellata)*, which can indicate a person's anxiety level. If this flower is held by the stem, it closes only if one has worries, faster for more anxious people.

Todas have used flowers to denote not only the season of the year, but every stage of it. For example, they can predict the impending end of the southwesterly monsoon by the mass flowering in the shola forests of the fragrant white *maw(r)sh* flowers *(Michelia nilagirica)*. Similarly, all the different seasons are indicated by the flowering cycles of different plants, certain of them being linked to climatic conditions and the position of heavenly bodies. For example, there is a single name for the most prominent star/planet in the night at a particular period, an herb that is in flower at that time, and the weather of that season.

The Three Ancient Links with Nature

Since ancient times, three irrevocable bonds have linked Todas to their natural environment. The first of these was established when the Toda gods – deified men and women – chose to reside in certain prominent Nilgiri peaks, ever afterward furnishing Todas with potent reminders of the unity of nature and divinity. During those early times, it is said, gods and Todas lived side by side. Natural landmarks still exist that are associated with divine exploits, testimonies to their life stories that Todas even now remember. These deities, after their time in human form, went on to occupy various hill summits where they are believed to reside. In addition, there are numerous other sacred hills that are of paramount importance to specific clans and hamlets, and their sacred prayer names are chanted by the priest regularly. Toda sacred hills lie at the very core of this people's cultural ethos, and they have assiduously protected them since ancient times.

The second great bond with nature is that instituted by the Todas' preeminent deity, Goddess Taihhki(r)shy, when she miraculously brought forth their unique breed of buffaloes, dividing the animals into secular and sacred herds. The goddess afterward also allocated *k̠wa(r)shm* (sacred names) to numerous natural phenomena amidst which the Todas live, and this, over a period of time, resulted in their sanctification. She thus established a sacred relationship with numerous aspects of surrounding nature, and gave them prayer names. Both the sacred buffaloes and the sanctification of nature went on to form the core of Toda cultural heritage.

Figure 7 - The hill deity Kawllvoy is believed to reside in this cliff. Photo by Tarun Chhabra.

For example, a Toda prayer consists of chant words addressed to major locally sacred and minor mountain gods, along with other natural landmarks, such as nearby peaks, slopes, valleys, ridges, and shola thickets, as well as specific sacred trees, rocks, swamps, meadows, pools, and streams. There are *k*wa(r)shm* also for the dairy-temple, buffalo pen, pen posts, pen-post bars and other dairy-temple items. If we analyze Toda prayers, we find a corpus of sacred names for several hundred natural features, and if we map all the named features that have survived the ravages of the recent march of civilization, then we have one important aspect of Toda sacred geography in place.

Another aspect of Toda sacred geography is their waters. The two major river systems, Kawllykeen (Mukurti-Pykara) and Kinatthill(zh)y (Avalanche-Emerald), represent sacred entities on the same level as that of the deity peaks. There is also a smaller river known as Taihh-vahh, or "river of the gods."

As is also the case with the deity hills, mortal Todas do not consider themselves capable of enhancing the sanctity of the sacred rivers. They do, however, understand that the crossing of such holy rivers in a state of purity and in accordance with prescribed regulations can lead to their own spiritual uplifting. They take great care to ensure that these "deity rivers" are not defiled in any manner. To prevent such defilement, Todas have established several ritually acceptable crossing points all along the course of these waterways. These crossings are often associated with the myths that tell of the origins of these river systems. Different crossing points have differing levels of sanctity, and there used to be specified fords for different categories, priests and laypeople, and always on the premise of ritual purity.

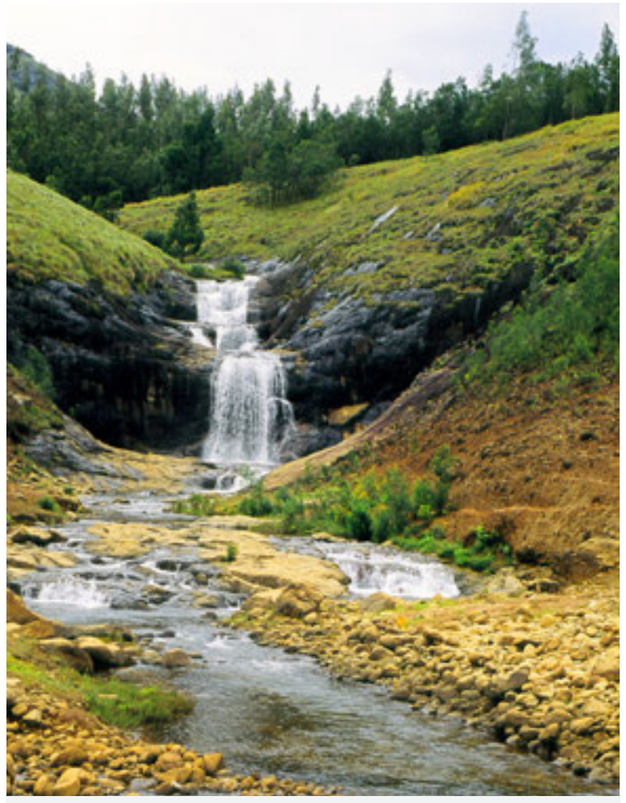

Figure 8 - Taihb-wa(r)shy vah- a sacred crossing. Photo by Tarun Chhabra

Interestingly, even today, an Indian who is out on a pilgrimage of the sacred sites of ancient India often uses the term *teertha-yaatra* for this journey. Few might be aware that the word *teertha* in Sanskrit is literally, "crossing place" of a sacred river, and this is how it was in ancient days, a physical place to ford a sacred river. Over a period of time, however, this term came to denote not only other places of religious significance, but also to signify places of spiritual crossing. Besides, most of these holy places were flanked by sacred rivers anyway. The ancient Upanishad texts refer to this as a "crossing over" marking the soul's spiritual transformation from this world to the world of the Supreme, the world illuminated by light of knowledge (Eck 2012). When we look at various elements of Toda sacred geography and culture, we are continuously reminded of those early days of the Indian civilization.

There is another category of locally sacred waters that are streams, pools, and springs associated with specific hamlets and dairy-temples. These are numerous and the mainstay of Toda culture, in the sense that their heritage cannot exist without them. Although the larger Indian population is unaware that the bountiful water that flows downstream from the Nilgiri Hills, and upon which millions of lives depend, is largely due to the management and sanctity accorded to the catchment areas by the Toda people. Since ancient times, many of the river systems originating around the Toda heartland have been venerated by Todas as deities. Because of such reverence, these river systems have been protected, thus providing the surrounding plains and hills of three Indian states with their principal sources of fresh water. By according sacred status to several hundreds of smaller freshwater sources situated in the vicinity of each hamlet and associating several of these with their dairy-temples and rituals, the Toda people have ensured that the surrounding ecosystem – including the hydrology-conserving species of plants – has been preserved.

Todas commonly attribute the drying up of their sacred water sources to disturbances in the ecosystem; for example, of constructing reservoirs, establishing plantation trees and crops, and due to climatic changes. By according sacred status to several wetlands, from which they harvest culturally important plant species, the Todas have managed their swampland ecology remarkably well, employing a combination of ritualism and expediency.

The Todas' third great bond to nature may have begun when Goddess Taihhki(r)shy's father Aihhn, presiding deity of the Toda afterworld, proclaimed that the only Todas who would qualify to reside, after death, in his realm were those who, during their lifetimes, had diligently performed all the rites of passage required of their gender – rites involving the use of many different kinds of plant material. This, in one stroke, resulted in the sanctification and protection of well over a hundred plant species. We saw earlier that the rituals related to pregnancy and paternity entail the use of nine floral species. If one adds the essential plants used not only for lifetime ceremonies but also for other cultural purposes, including those to be used to construct dairy-temples, the list of protected species comes closer to 200.

Toda Management of Ecosystems

Until two centuries ago, the Todas people had complete control over the management of their sacred sites. The sites were maintained in a pristine condition, as proved by the establishment of the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve (NBR) in 1986, and this area is considered to be the most important area for plant speciation in southern India. Thereafter, despite the establishment of protected reserve forests, national parks, and the NBR, the biodiversity of this sacred landscape has been steadily undermined. Vast stretches of pristine grasslands were planted with exotic trees brought in from Australia, the most biodiverse and water-generating wetlands were either farmed or flooded by hydroelectric reservoirs, and sholas (referred to as "living fossils") dating back to the time of the continental drift, were decimated.

The Toda people have ritualized the concept of ecosystem management, much as they have done to many facets of life. Until some decades ago, the priest of the highest grade of dairy-temple would usher in the onset of the frosty winter months by using firesticks to set fire to selected portions of grassland at the foot of deity hills. Although the process of selective burning of grasslands has been scientifically proven to be beneficial for the ecology, this ritual, as mentioned earlier, has been proscribed (please note: the word is proscribed, since it has been stopped by the Forest Department of India). The Todas continue to make fire for other ritual purposes and perform a variety of other indirect ecosystem management practices.

Figure 9 - These pristine shola grassland ecotypes form the core of the NBR. Photo by Tarun Chhabra.

The most important among these are the salt-giving rites for the Todas' endemic breed of buffalo during different seasons. In addition to the utilitarian function of periodically providing salt to the buffaloes, this rite is so important that a failure to perform it is deemed an invitation to ecological ill-health. For example, the Todas believe that a failure to perform this ritual during the winter season would mean an absence of frost, resulting

Figure 10 - The salt-giving rites are a form of indirect ecosystem management. Photo by Tarun Chhabra.

in a failure of the proper flowering cycle of some plants, thus making the impending honey and wild fruit season erratic. A similar omission during summer is believed to result in the failure of the Southwest Monsoon, thus causing a shortage of pasture with resultant meager milk yields, along with a depletion of water.

Todas perform an annual pilgrimage to the deity hill Kawnttaihh where they pray to the major natural sacred sites in the vicinity for general and ecological well-being. It was on the slopes of this hill that the priest would ritually fire the grassland to herald the onset of winter. They also conduct a ceremony atop Paw(r)sh hill, where they pray for benediction and environmental health to the Kawllykeen (Pykara) river deity that flows just below.

Conclusion

The most noteworthy of Toda values are the imperative to treat their homeland as a sacred, worshipped entity and the requirement to act upon the deeply rooted belief in the myriad ways by which the community is linked to Mother Nature. In the clash of values brought about in the outside world with lucre and violence being all too common, it is the traditional value system of indigenous peoples such as the Todas that is most likely to take a back seat.

Even today, Todas meet with introspection, rather than anger and a desire for retaliation, the loss of a buffalo to a predatory tiger residing near their hamlets. Amazingly, they can accept their loss as being a kind of godsend. Not long ago a Toda council was held to discuss the issue of tigers straying into their hamlets. The opinion was that this was happening because Todas themselves were moving away from their heritage, and thus, the protector was becoming the aggressor.

A traditional Toda mind does not register his environment as just a series of natural sites. When a Toda looks at certain hills, he sees them as the abodes of deities whose sacred names he has chanted. Indeed, when he looks at many a rock, or rock formation, tree, pathway, or body of water, they are seen as manifestations of divinity, integral parts of the sacred world of the hamlet, clan, and community.

When I first interacted with the Todas in the early 1990s, it appeared their culture was at a crossroads. The government had succeeded in making this buffalo-oriented community into unwilling farmers. Although that changeover now appears permanent, Todas have demonstrated remarkable alacrity in rebuilding long-abandoned dairy-temples and seasonal hamlets, often after a hiatus of several decades. Fortunately, the Toda value system remains strong, with these people continuing to hold on to many of their traditional ideals.

Modern developmental activities must recognize that all indigenous people have an ancient heritage, and that their value systems have evolved and endured over the centuries. Therefore, the need of the day is for holistic development that incorporates the traditional knowledge and value systems of such people, as well as the most important aspects of their traditional ways of life. For instance, if the government had promoted the age-old pastoral ways of the Todas rather than making them into reluctant farmers, these people would have continued with a vocation they love and at the same time drawn economic benefits from the traditional dairying activity that is most ecofriendly.

Since the Toda people are no more allowed to manage their sacred homeland, the best way of preserving this valuable legacy would be to declare these deity hills and their surrounding ecosystem as a Toda World Heritage Site and protect them accordingly. IJW

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