



BELIEF SYSTEM AND ORAL TRADITION OF THE TODA TRIBAL RELIGION

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Abstract: Tribal religion is based on oral traditions. The tribes express their beliefs in everyday language. Their rituals are aimed at solving day to day problems of life. Objects of worship are things of Nature such as trees, rivers, mountain, sun, moon and earth. Offerings are usually in the form of food and drink, domesticated birds and animals. Rituals are mostly performed collectively and transmitted orally. It is descriptive, demonstrative and readily discernible. Among the tribes religious myth, belief, religious value and religious action are not treated as something apart from other kinds of belief and behaviour, as followed in social, economic and political contexts. Yet, the meaning of beliefs and behaviour of the tribals appears mysterious to the outsiders. This is precisely because theirs is a religion without explanation. However, tribal religion is no less complete than the highly developed form of complex religion to the extent that its implicit philosophy recognises the same universal truth. This paper examines the nature of the belief system and oral tradition of the Toda tribal religion.

Key words: Toda, Herdsmen, Toda munds, Pastoral Society, Ritualized Buffalo- Cult, Green Funeral

I. INTRODUCTION

Religion is a set of beliefs and practices generally held by an individual and community, involving adherence to codified rituals. Special emphasis of this study is indigenous religion, its organisation and functioning in the traditional and modern context. Religion pervades all aspects of tribal life that is why for understanding the tribal lifestyle we need to first understand the tribe's religious notions. Rituals are a feature of all known human societies. They include not only the worship rites and sacraments of organized religions and cults, but also rites of passage, atonement and purification rites, dedication coronations

ceremonies, and presidential inaugurations, marriages and funerals, and more. Many religions have considered cattle to be sacred, most famously Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, and ancient Greek and Egyptian religion. Cattles and buffalos are respected by many pastoral peoples that rely on the animals. Todas were purely a pastoral people and they wandered over the Nilgiri hills along with their buffaloes in search of grazing lands. The care of buffaloes and the duties connected with the dairy formed the sole work of the Todas.

Objectives

- ❖ To identify the cultural features of the Todas inhabiting Nilgiris.
- ❖ To identify the Religious practices of the Todas inhabiting in Nilgiris District.
- ❖ To understand the Todas various rituals by studying selected Toda Munds (Village).
- ❖ To assess the role of the Buffalos in the Toda society,

Methodology

For this study Toda munds (settlements) in Udthagamandalam and kotagiri Taluks of Nilgiri District were selected, because of the high concentration of the Todas on the upper Nilgiri plateau. To collect data on the community, participant observation method was used i.e., to be present with Toda people. The information was supplemented through interviews with my Toda friends & informants. The type of interview was closed and the questions were asked on the basis of broad research guide - lines. The secondary data was collected from tribal research centre, Libraries in Nilgiris.

Habitat of the Toda

In Nilgiri districts, the Todas live in 69 settlements. In 2000 there were 56 occupied Toda *munds*. The Toda settlement is referred to as 'Mund'. These Munds are unethic villages where only Toda population is very interesting. James Wilkinson Breeks (1873) concluded on 15th Nov 1871 that the Todas in the Nilgiris numbered 639 by the census. In the year 1892, the total population of the Todas was estimated to be 739 and in 1901 their population was 714. According to census of India 1981, Todas population was 874 members. In the year 2004 it was found that 1648.

Pastoral Society

Todas were purely a pastoral people and they wandered over the Nilgiri hills along with their buffaloes in search of grazing lands. The Toda have been a pastoral society, almost wholly dependent for their livelihood on their large herds of long-horned hill buffaloes. The care of buffaloes and the duties connected with the dairy formed the sole work of the Todas. Todas life is very much devoted to their buffaloes. Finicio, a

Portuguese priest who visited Nilgiri hills in 1603 wrote of the Toda, "they have no crops of any kind, and no occupation but the breeding of buffaloes, on whose milk and butter are their live".

Todas and Their Buffalos

Among Indian breeds of buffaloes, the Toda buffalo is a unique breed and a genetically isolated population, confined to the Nilgiri hills of Tamil Nadu. These buffaloes are reared mainly by the Toda tribes who are among the most aboriginal inhabitants of this country. Todas buffaloes are one of the varieties of water-buffaloes. They are semi-wild and they attack strangers. There are many incidents where in Europeans were attacked and injured by these buffaloes. The male buffaloes called er and the female is called ir and calf is called kor it is quite interesting to note that these buffalos have individual names and the names are given when they were born. It is a custom that the buffaloes are tended entirely by males and males only are allowed to take any part either in the dairy or in those dairy operations which are performed in house. Toda buffaloes are divided into two categories - sacred and ordinary. As per the literature, there was no appreciable increase in the population of Toda buffaloes since 1848, remained consistently around 2000. The population reported was 2171, 1619, 2186, 2650, 2002 and 3531 during the years 1848, 1930, 1960, 1975, 1986 and 1994 respectively. At present, the population is less than 1500 in the tract. These buffaloes are exclusively thriving on grazing alone. No money is spent on feeding these animals as no concentrate or supplementary feeding is practiced. The Todas of the Nilgiris are as endangered a community as their most sacred and beloved of assets, the horned, grey woolly Buffalo. While they number 1,500 in population, their buffalos total about 1,000 today. Both are endemic to the Nilgiris and are struggling to survive.

The Todas were traditional pastoralists until very recently with their buffaloes grazing the lush grasslands. The buffaloes are inseparable in the life cycle of a Toda. Buffaloes play crucial role in both the economic and religious life. They created religious and social values around the buffalo, including their origin myth. The first sacred buffalo had been created by the gods before the first Toda man and woman. Because of this nature even today they treat buffaloes equal to the human beings. The dairy and buffaloes are closely linked the life of Toda. Since the Todas are the pastoral community tribes they maintain the dairy as the sacred place, they call the dairy as 'ti' in which there are two kinds of buffaloes. The ordinary buffalo called putiir is looked after by the male Todas. The milk and milk products of these buffaloes are used largely for personal consumption.

Todas name their buffaloes. The naming ceremony is performed when the buffalo calves for the first time. The first milking of a temple buffalo is a ritual event. A ritual also marks the salt giving ceremony. This ritual takes place twice a year. The first one is the Ponyup in December or January and the second one is the Korup in March or April. The Toda seasonally observe ritualistic migrations. There are prescribed routes for the buffaloes and for the dairymen. Those who have trekked up the Silent Valley from KuntiPuzha in Kerala to reach Upper Bhavani have observed old shift grazing sites. Apart from these religious ceremonies, buffaloes appear critically in social ceremonies such as, marriage, pregnancy ritual, and funerals as well.

Rituals

During the various rituals and functions, the buffaloes are donated to the temple. While dedicating the buffaloes to the temples, the animals are driven through a stone circle (Nurthkursh). Particularly, when a Toda woman gives birth to a child, one or more buffaloes are donated as an act of remembrance. The

donated buffalo herd is maintained as temple animals (Posthirr) by the priests. The milking and churning operations of the dairy form the basis of the greater part of the religions ritual of the Todas. The lives of the people are largely devoted to their buffaloes, and the care of these animals, regarded as more sacred than the rest, in associated with much ceremonial. The sacred animals are attended by men. The priests churn the milk and prepare ghee for lighting the lamps at the temple. The other milk products are used by the priests for their food. The ordinary operations of the dairy have become a religious ritual and ceremonies of a religious character accompany nearly every important incident in the lives of the buffaloes.

Highly Ritualized Toda Religious Culture

The religion of the Toda is a highly ritualized buffalo- cult. Every important operation connected with the buffaloes is conducted according to rule, making and converting the milk successively into butter and ghee ,giving salt to the buffaloes, taking them on migration to fresh pastures, burning over the pastures, giving a buffalo a name when it has calved for the first time, introducing new utensils into the dairy and preparing new coagulant for the milk, rebuilding and re-thatching the dairy, consecrating dairymen, and even drinking buttermilk from the dairy. All the rules apply to the sacred buffalo cult.

A Toda Is Nothing without His Buffalo

Todas do not worship idols or deities. The religion of the Todas is highly ritualized with the concept of purity and pollution around buffaloes, dairies, and priest. The greater part of religious observance is also focused on buffalo and its care. The Todas are living from the birth to death in the shadow of buffalo. Central to Toda religion are sacred places associated with the community's dairy-temples, their related buffalo herds. This temple is considered by them sacred and they do not allow anyone to go near it. Toda temple contains a carved imitation of the buffalo's horn as a sacred symbol. The Todas believe that the buffaloes are created by the goddess Teikirzi, or the "goddess of the mountains". The buffaloes created by the male deity are the progenitors of the sacred buffaloes while the ordinary buffaloes or putiir are descended from those created by the wife. Considered more valuable than gold and worshipped for centuries by this gentle and simple community of pastoral herders, the buffalo finds a place in all traditional Toda rituals in marriages, births and deaths, besides being kept for milk and for company. **"A Toda is nothing without his buffalo,"** says K. Vasamalli, Programme Officer, SEVA, and the community's first of four women graduates.



Toda Dairy- Temple

Due to scared nature of buffalo, the milk is also treated with sanctity. When compared to the present time the buffaloes were given more sacred status in the past.

Prosperity of the Mund

"The prosperity of each mund is judged by the herds of wild buffaloes owned by it. These ferocious but magnificent animals roam the forests living on wild vegetation and when it is time to milk them, the Toda in charge makes a rather weird call and immediately the wild herd returns to the mund. After the milking is over, the herd adjourns to the wilds again."

It was generally (although not invariably) true - some 40 years ago - that a hamlet's prosperity could be judged by the size of its buffalo herd. It is now altogether another story. Scarcely 10 per cent of Toda households own sufficient buffaloes for economic viability and, for the most part, buffalo husbandry have been sidelined by agriculture. The dung collected from the pen is sold to the farmers nearby. They never sell the buffaloes for meat. The milk products are sold to the local Co-operative Milk Societies and some quantity to other milk traders. In recent times they have started cultivation activities and the educated have started working in government departments. While milk products from domestic buffaloes are being sold, the milk products from sacred buffaloes are used only for rituals in the temples.

Social Value

All the Toda settlements encompass traditional huts along with a buffalo pen, a separate calf pen and a traditional temple surrounded by vast grassland and Shola forests. Each Toda family owns domestic buffaloes (Puthirr). The milk products, particularly the butter and ghee are used for external use, applying on the body and hair for making the unique hair style of the Toda women. The Toda people are purely vegetarians. Rice is their staple food which they procure from the neighboring tribes in exchange of milk or milk-products. The most favorite dish of the Toda is rice boiled in milk, locally known as 'jagari'. They usually prepare different vegetable dishes to round up their diet. They habitually take different milk-products too.

Dry Funerals of the Toda

Buffalo cows are slaughtered for ceremonial purposes to propitiate the dead relatives of the clan. Among the rituals, the rituals related to death are the most important in Toda culture and the buffalo plays a big role in this ritual. Buffaloes play a major role during the funerals of the Toda. The Toda used to slaughter buffaloes during funerals. They believed that the buffaloes would accompany the deceased to the world of the dead. The number of buffaloes slaughtered during the funerals would decide the social position of a Toda. When the Toda priest of a temple dies, the cremation can take place only after a buffalo is sacrificed. This ceremony is called as a "green funeral"; and after a few days, the relics of the burnt body are collected. This ritual is called "dry funeral".

Green Funeral

The sacrificed buffalo and other ornaments and a utensil are placed near the body of the deceased before cremation. **The Todas believe that by this sacrifice, the deceased soul will reach the other world and**

live with the buffalo and the other articles dedicated during the green funeral. The Todas are unique in that they are probably either the only or among the few vegetarian tribes in the world. Except for the single buffalo sacrificed at the death of a priest, buffaloes are never killed by the Todas.

Migration

It was customary that some buffaloes would migrate from one place to another in search of pasture during dry season that lasts from January to March. In connection with the migrations of the herds of buffaloes, Dr. Rivers writes as follows. "At certain seasons of the year, it is customary that the buffaloes both of the village and the ti (Diary temple) should migrate from one place to another. Sometimes the village buffaloes are accompanied by all the inhabitants of the village; sometimes the buffaloes are only accompanied by their dairy-man and one or more male assistants. There are two chief reasons for these movements of the buffaloes, of which the most urgent is the necessity for new grazing-places. The other chief reason for the migrations is that certain villages and dairies, formerly important and still sacred, are visited for ceremonial purposes, or out of respect to ancient custom.

Religious status of Toda Women

Central to Toda religion are sacred places associated with the community's dairy-temples, their related buffalo herds, appurtenances and priesthood of ghee etc is the sole right of men. This dairy-temples are considered by them sacred and they do not allow anyone to go near it. Entry into a Toda dairy is prohibited to women. But the dairy-temples are not "secret"; many are located within the *munds* themselves. The women are not allowed to participate in their religious activities but they are also prohibited from any part in the milking of the ordinary buffaloes or in the churning of the milk which is performed solely by males. They are excluded from any share in the work of the dairy connected with the sacred buffaloes. Many Toda women embraced Christianity, in order to avoid traditional rituals like pre-puberty defloration, social paternity, and funeral rites of sacrificing the buffaloes, have established their own families away from the traditional family organization.

Conclusion

The Todas were traditional pastoralists until very recently with their buffaloes grazing the lush grasslands. The buffaloes are inseparable in the life cycle of a Toda . Buffaloes play crucial role in both the economic and religious life. The revered place of the buffalo in Toda society represents a remarkable feature of their life. Over the centuries, the Toda came to rely heavily upon the buffalo for their livelihood. Apart from these religious ceremonies; buffaloes appear in social ceremonies such as, marriage, pregnancy ritual, and funerals as well. Todas have many rites connected with the sacred buffalo, milking of these buffaloes, churning of the milk, preparation.

Toda lifestyle was rudely disrupted by the colonial interventions in the region. They were no longer able to pursue their pastoral nomadic way of life as earlier. When the grazing lands converted into cultivable lands by non-tribal, grazing lands disappeared and the Todas stopped moving to other areas along with their families and buffalos. They permanently live in settlements. They stopped the nomadic pastoral life because of: Influx of immigrants, Extension of agriculture/plantain activities by non-tribes into grazing lands,

Promotion of tourism and development of Nilgiri upper plateau as a hill – station, Development of hydro - electric reservoir.

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