



ISSN 2278 – 0211 (Online)

Ethos of Todas – Integrating With Sylvan System

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Abstract:

The topic Ethos of Todas – Integrating with Sylvan System, deals about the conventional and religious practices of Toda tribes. It also discusses how the peculiar practices of Todas are integrated with nature and its infrastructure. There are many dimensions are there in the tribal and environmental research. The topic focuses on the livelihood strategies are closely knitted with sylvan system. The religious and cultural practices of Todas are as follows, fire cult, moon veneration, sun worship, tree worship and ditties for rain pouring. The study limits on the Todas tribe only. The objectives of the study, to bring forth the life system of the Todas tribe and ecological infrastructure of the Nilgiris. As the study is related to religious and cultural practices, the descriptive method is followed. In this study, the sources are very meager, though plenty in other dimensions. The hypothetical concept is stated that, conventional and religious practices of Todas are really integrated with sylvan system.

1. Introduction

Everyone knows that Eco-system is an effective agent between the cosmos and the individual. Ecological equilibrium strengthens the human life as it is the core and empirical creation. The total environment is inclusive of both the controlled and the uncontrolled environment. Man has a control over a part of environment is known as controlled environment (Social environment) while part of it is not amenable to his control is called uncontrolled environment (Geographical environment).

Man is influenced by his environment and in turn he influences the environment. It is also believed that the environment determines and builds the culture. Nobody can ignore the impact of environment on the life and culture and the interrelation and interdependence between the man and his environment. Hence the ecology is directly or indirectly integrating with the human life.

“The environment has the nature as its core part. Nature is the material world itself, taken as including or not including human being, ‘nature’ has often been used to describe the countryside, the unspoiled places, as also plants and animals, other than man”¹. “The system, nature has five elements like air, water, land, flora and fauna, which are interconnected, inter-related and inter-dependent and have co-evolved and co-adapted. Deterioration in any one inevitably affects the other four elements. Originally, man was the part of the nature component, but now modernization and technology has overshadowed nature. This destruction of the earth is being accelerated further by industrialization and massive demand of raw-materials, which often pays too heavily on nature. It is being felt that nature is not just being destroyed, but it is also being steadily transformed through modernization and advancement of technology”². “The evil side and peril dimension of technology is amply summarized by E.F. Schumacher by stating that, “If technology is felt to be becoming more and more inhuman, we might do well to consider whether it is possible to have something better in a technology with human face”³.

The man is an outstanding foe of the nature which faces a great peril and a vast deluge. Life system pushes them to encounter with the natural resources. The natural resources renewable or non renewable belong not only the generation of the past and present but also forthcoming generation. As the five super powers vizly Forest, Earth, Water, Fire and Space are closely integrating with life of human beings, majority of the people from the plain and power and money mongers pay more interest in exploiting the natural resources according to their own wish and want. The researchers of the modern world hold a view that ecological approach is fruitful to understand man, his society and his culture. Interaction between living organisms and their environment are the subject matter of ecological studies.

2. Statement of the Problem

The Tribes are an artistic creation and part of our society. They are very distinct in culture and apart from mainstream of the population. Tribal people are vulnerable and discriminated group in India even after the Independence. They isolated from the main stream of the society, astounded and unable to fight against the onslaught of the highly competitive surroundings. They remain silenced a lot in their inability to fight for their rights and freedom. It is well known that they are being still exploited by many ways.

Many tribes still practice primitive method of life strategies. The Government has implemented many development schemes but still they face economical, social and cultural problems.

Tamilnadu is one of the major states in South zone where tribes live. Most of them live in the hills and remote areas. In Tamil Nadu out of 36 tribal groups, the Government of India identified six tribal communities as Primitive Tribal Groups (PTGs) as the basis of pre agriculture level of technology, stagnant of population, extremely low literacy and a subsistence level of economy. These six primitive tribes are 1. Todas, 2. Kotas, 3. Kurumbas, 4. Irulas, 5. Paniyas and 6. Kattunaickens. All these six primitive tribal groups are found in Nilgiri District where is considered as "Tribal Ethnic Zone".

Each of the tribes has their own peculiar historical background. Almost the economic status among them is rock bottom level and they are depending upon the money lenders. As they live in the forest and hills they are in all sorts of backwardness traditionally they have faith in customs and conventions. They are rich in culture but poor in living condition.

The social, economic and cultural status of the Nilgiri tribes is directly related to the environment (hills and forest). Their beliefs, customs and conventions are sustaining as these are related with forest and its resources. The human beings even now not only the tribes but also the plain people have faith that trees are abode of both the Gods and Devils. The tribal culture, custom, festivals, economical activities are also closely integrated with the nature. Some of the tribal community follows the medical process through medicinal herbs to cure some kinds of diseases. If the environmental or forest resources face havoc, their life system will be severely affected. To make the life system in effective manner, the natural resources have to be preserved.

"The Todas is one of the primitive tribes in Nilgiris. They are pastoral people and depend upon milk and its by-products. They live in thatched mud houses. Their dialect is branched on South Dravidian language"⁴. "Food system is pure vegetarianism. The society is well-knitted and economy is processed on cultivations"⁵. But the Todas perform some activities as the religious practices which are closely integrating with nature and environment.

So, the statement of the problem is their ethos, being really integrated or deviated with sylvan based life. The area where they existing vivify the environment or mortalizes the sustainability of the same. Hence, this study analyses whether the life system, livelihood strategies, customs, conventions and religious beliefs of Todas tribe are nature based and sylvan oriented.

3. Limitations

There are 36 tribal groups in Tamilnadu. Out of 36 groups, there are 6 primitive tribal groups in Nilgiri district. Todas is one of the most significant tribal groups. The Nilgiri district is one of the important red spots of the world announced by UNESCO. So, the study has two limitations on only one tribal group (Todas) and the study topographically concentrates on Nilgiris only.

4. Objectives

This paper aims to bring forth the spiritual characters and premodial sentiments of Todas in Nilgiris. It focuses light on the religious belief, customs and convention directly or indirectly interlinking with environment. It also analyses their life system how far closely related with the sylvan system.

5. Sources

Thurstan Edgar's Castes and Tribes of South India gives more accounts on the tribes in Tamil Nadu especially Todas in Nilgiris. Walker Antony. R.'s book, The Todas of South India, a new look, offers much more religious practices of Todas of Nilgiris. The Todas is the master piece work of River. W.H.R reveals the multi angle life of system of the tribes Toda. Saha N. Population Genetic Studies in Kerala and the Nilgiris and Sen Gupta.P.N. 1960, Diataries of the Primitive Tribes of Nilgiris' have more ideas to know about the tribal practices. Short. J and Colouchterlony's An Account of the tribes of the Nilgiris describes the life system of the tribes. Emeneau's M.B. book, Todas song, opens veils and reveals songs related to religious and premodial sentiments of Todas. The Racial Affinities of the People of India by Guha B.S and Pandit's S.R. Blood group distribution in the Todas are resource for knowing their culture and race of the Todas respectively. Breeks, James Wilkinsons's, An account of the primitive tribes and monuments of the Nilgiris and Francis walker's The Nilgiris are also the sources of information to know about Todas.

6. Spiritual Characters and Premodial Practices of the Todas

6.1. Fire Making

The Todas know how to make fire for several sacred purposes by friction with the fire sticks. "Several kinds of wood are used for the fire sticks. The Toda names of these trees Kiaz or Keadj, Mors, Parskuti and Main. Only first of these however may be used if fire is being made for sacred purpose and it was also easier to make fire with this than with any other"⁶.

In some Toda villages a stone is kept called "tiimukal" which was used to at one time for making fire by striking it with piece of iron. Probably this method was employed for non sacred purposes in the period between giving up the fire sticks for ordinary purposes and the introduction of matches. "The todas have two kinds of fire place the "Waskal" consisting of three stones and the "Kudrvars" with four stones. The former is found in the dwelling hut in the "Wursuli" and in the dairy and the latter in the "tarvali" and "Kudrpali". "It is also noted that "waskal" is the name used by the "Teivaliol" and Kudrvars by the "Tartharol" and it may be that this is the explanation of the apparent anomaly"⁷.

6.2. *Trees and Plants*

“The most sacred tree of the Todas is undoubtedly the “Tudr”. The name is given by the Todas to two species “Meliesma pungen” and “Meliesma Wightii”, the two trees are resembling one another closely. The bark is largely used in the dairy ceremonial and especially in the ordination ceremonies of the palol and other dairy men drawn from the Teivaliol and Melgarsol”⁸

It uses especially connected with the people of these section of Toda community, but the rest of the Tartharol undergo a ceremony at the second funeral in which Tudr is used and this was said to have the purpose that every Toda should be purified with Tudr before he enters on the future life. “The log and leaves of Tudr are also used in the ceremony of erkumtthpimi and here it is used by both Trivoliol and Tartharol alike. The leaves of Tudr used in these ceremonies must be perfect and the bark must be knocked off the tree by means of a stone this being is one of the Todas practices which show the persistence of stone implements ceremonial”⁹. The identity of this sacred tree is important, for it may furnish a clue to the home of the Todas. So sacred a tree would almost certainly have been already known to the Todas when they reached Nilgiris though it is of course on account of its resemblance to some tree sacred in their past history. The tree has however a wide distribution in India. Another tree name called Kiaz tree has a major role at the time of pregnancy ceremony. Father of pregnant woman brings the bow which is made of from a shrub (*Sophora glauca*). The bow and arrow handed to the woman by the man who is to become the father of her child. “Under the Kiaz tree the process goes on by raising them to her forehead and places them under the Kiaz tree. From this moment the lawful father of the child is the man from whom she has received the bow and arrow. He places on the ground at the foot of the Kiaz tree some rice, various kinds of grain, chillies, jaggery and salt tied in a cloth. All those present then leave except the man and woman who remain near the tree till about 6 o’ clock in the evening”¹⁰. The leaves of the tree are used in the various branches of the dairy ritual. Those in most frequent use are various kinds called generally by the Todas “Muli”, three of which belong to the Genus *Rubus*. The young shoots of the same plants are used in the ordination ceremony. “Grasses are also used in Toda ceremony and one of these, a slender grass called Kakar (*Eragrostica nigra*) is used for several occasions, those of especial importance being the ordination of the Teivoli and the sweeping of the threshold of the dairy by a soil at the migration ceremony. The same grass is also used in one of the methods adopted to promote speedy delivery in child birth”¹¹

6.3. *Sun Worship*

The sun is the source of enormous energy through the process of ionization. It is an atmospheric object of reverence by the human beings. It is the duty of every man of Todas when first he leaves his hut in the morning to salute the sun by raising his hand to his face in the Kaimukti salutation. The sun is also saluted Palol when he comes out of his dairy to milk buffaloes. The door of the dairies faces towards more or less eastern direction. So the dairy man in the morning, first worships the sun and does the another process. “The sun plays a part in the ceremony which takes place when a woman goes to the seclusion hut after childbirth, but there was some reason to think that this was due to the belief in the noxious influence of the mysterious body ‘Kerit’ which is near the sun and not to the influence of the sun itself. When performing the ceremony on leaving the seclusion hut the woman faces the sun, and this may an act of reverence. Since now Kerit is no longer feared”¹²

6.4. *Moon Veneration*

Meager level veneration is paid to the moon by the Todas. No salutation is paid at all to the New moon when it is first seen, but after a day or two usually on the third day, it is a custom to bow down the head, so that the forehead rests on the corner of the putkuli. “Where the Todas throw away water on the day of the Full moon, they do not throw it towards the moon, but away from it. Thus if the moon is opposite of the door of the hut, the people will go around to the back in order to throw water here”¹³.

6.5. *Light Reverence*

Light an illuminating unseen object of the globe and it an object of reverence to the Todas. It is stated that when the household lamp is lighted in the evening. Obeisance is paid to it by bringing the right hand to the face and this sign of reverence is still shown. “In the dairy ceremonial the lamp and the light gives also undoubtedly revered, and lighting the lamp is as we have seen, an act of a ceremonial character”¹⁴. In some cases the lamps used in the dairies are certainly very ancient and are believed to have come from ‘amnodr’, but it is clear that they are not revered merely on this account, for a lamp of modern origin would when once concentrated be treated with as much reverence those which had come down from antiquity.

6.6. *Stone Cult*

The Todas of Nilgiris have many stones which may be held to have some degrees of sanctity; certainly many have their places in religious ceremonial. During migration ceremony at the ‘ti’ there are stones marking spots (where dairy vessels are taken up and putting down) the stones used are called ‘Neurzulnkars’. At several dairies these stones are anointed, and then appearance indicates that they have undergone the process for very long period of the time. “At other places they are so weathered and worn away that must obviously be of great antiquity. At some dairies of nodrs ti, the stone place of the head of ‘Kaltmikh’ in the ceremonies accompanying migration but at other places they are said to have different values”¹⁵

6.7. *Ditty on Rain Pouring*

Water is elixir of life. It can be had from nature by rain pouring and melting of ice. The former process is better one than that of latter, as it makes ecological side effects. Celebrating religious activities and performing poojas for pouring the rain are possible today in the

society. All these activities are due to the water quenches all thirsts related to human beings. The river bed caused for many world civilizations. Hence, the survival of the human beings is depend upon significance of water. Not only the plain people, but also the tribes of Nilgiris, especially Todas has the customs for chanting the songs for rain pouring. Of Todas songs, the following has been taken for significance of the rain water.

“Sunshine is increasing
must is fast gathering
rain may come,
thunder roars,
clouds are gathering”¹⁶.
“Rain is pouring,
wind and rain have combined,
oh! Powerful god, may everything prosper!
May charity increase!
The sun is shining,
the wind is blowing,
rain is coming,
the trees are in flower,
tears are falling,
the nose is burning”¹⁷.

The Todas are making chant for rain falling, growth of plant, prosperity of buffaloes and prosperity of life.

7. Conclusion

The nature is the greatest boon to the human society. The Tribal groups maximizes their life system with nature based. The Todas in Nilgiris lead peculiar life in such a way. Their belief and customs are directly related with eco-system. The forest fulfills their needs and so they have to protect the forest and follow the tree worship. The fire making is one of the peculiar systems of the Todas culture. Sun worship is a kind of belief which bestows riches to their life and Light reverence is the best instance for their religious practice. The stone cult is a kind of primitive method inherited from classical days in the tribal life. Water is an elixir of life. It can be found as gaseous, liquid and solid state. Rain pouring is related with ecological equilibrium. But, the Todas have a system of worshipping for rain pouring. This strategy reveals the knowledge of classical literature which makes their relationship with nature. It is concluded that Todas life system, religious practices, livelihood strategies and ethos are greatly integrating with sylvan system.

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