

14. Indigenous Tribes as Ecopreservers of Blue Mountain

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Abstract:

The Nilgiri Hills is home to tribal groups, including the Toda, Kota, Badaga and Kurumba. They traditionally relied on each other for different goods and services in a complex trade network. Tribe's customs and conventions depend on the conservation of nature and biodiversity. Various schemes have been initiated by the Government to promote their wellbeing and encourage their sustainable activities. This paper deals with different tribes inhabiting Nilgiri mountain, their heritage, customs and environment protection activities.

Keywords: Tribes, Nilgiri hills, customs, heritage, environment.

14.1 Introduction:

The Nilgiri Hills is a region of mountains, forests and tea plantations located in southern India where the states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka all come together and rise to a height of 2,400 meters. The highlands are rolling grasslands with patches of temperate forest known as shoala. The Nilgiri Hills receive over 14 feet of rain a year, the second highest rate in India. Over 80 percent of this rain falls during monsoon season which runs from June to August. On the southern, windward side of the hills the forests are wet and lush. The forests on the northern, leeward side are arid and scrubby. The controlled environment is otherwise known as the social environment. Both types of environments directly or indirectly influence characters, customs, conventions, beliefs, taboos, and other livelihood strategies of human society (Karthikeyan, 2014). Plants are playing an important role in the health of millions of people's lives in many villages of India in their day-to-day life by its traditional usage (Poorani et al., 2016). Herbal medicine is the foundation for about 75–80% of the world population, mainly targeting primary health care in the developing countries because of better cultural acceptability, compatibility with human body and lesser side effects. It is a country rich in indigenous herbal resources that grow on their varied topography and under changing agro climatic conditions permitting the growth of almost over 6000 plants used in traditional, folk and herbal medicines. In fact, colonial rule brought in the first radical change in resource use in the Indian subcontinent and it gradually transformed natural resources to grow commercial economic activity and generate revenue and profit. Nilgiris is situated at an elevation of 900 to 2636 meters above MSL. Its latitudinal and longitudinal dimensions being 130 KM (Latitude: 10 – 38 WP 11-49N) by 185 KM (Longitude: 76.0 E to 77.15 E). The Nilgiris is bounded on North by Karnataka State on the East by Coimbatore District, Erode District, South by Coimbatore District and

Kerala State and as the West by Kerala State. In Nilgiris District, the topography is rolling and steep. About 60% of the cultivable land fall under the slopes ranging from 16 to 35%. The Nilgiris District comprises of six Taluks that is Udhagamandalam, Kundah, Coonoor, Kotagiri, Gudalur and Pandalur. These Taluks are divided into four Panchayat Unions viz., Udhagamandalam, Coonoor, Kotagiri and Gudalur, and two Municipalities as Wellington Containment and Aruvankadu Township. The District consists of 88 Revenue Villages and 15 Revenue Firkas. There are three Revenue Divisional in this District viz., Udhagai, Coonoor and Gudalur. There are 35 Village Panchayat and 11 Town Panchayat in this District. The Nilgiri region is inhabited by the following tribal groups—the Paniya, Toda, Kota, Irula, Kattunayaka, Mullu Kurumba, Urali Kurumba, and Jenu Kurumba, etc. All these communities represent the relationship with the forests, and they had an intimate knowledge on flora and fauna of their territories. The different tribal communities are present at different socio-economic levels based on their occupation patterns and culture of some of these tribal ethnic groups over a period. The study was undertaken to gain knowledge on tribal community, customs and conventions, Government schemes to promote their socio-economic status with the following objectives.

14.2 Objectives:

- A. To portray the heritage, customs and legends of tribal communities in Nilgiri District
- B. To examine the challenges faced by the tribal people
- C. To analyze the Government schemes to promote the tribal lifestyle

14.3 History:

- A. History of Nilgiri hills dates back to many centuries.
- B. The holy Rishi, Valmiki quoted Nilgiri hills in his epic, the Ramayana.
- C. This name has been found also in the epic, Silappadikaram written in the 5th–6th century ad by Prince Ilanko Adikal
- D. The kurunji flower which blooms every twelve years giving the slopes a bluish tinge to the mountain and hence the name Blue Mountain to the hills.
- E. At the start, Todas occupied the the Ooty area and the Kotas the Kotagiri area.
- F. 1550 C.E.: The Badagas migrated from the Mysore Plateau,
- G. 1602: Portuguese priest, Ferreiri, explored the hills and identified the Toda people.
- H. 1810: Englishman Francis Buchanan from British East India Company failed to survey the Nilgiris Hills jungles. Followed by him, John Sullivan, the Collector of Coimbatore just south of the Nilgiris, sent two surveyors, Keys and Macmohan, to study the hills.
- I. 1819: A thorough exploration of Ooty Hill and the region was submitted by and “the existence of a tableland possessing a European climate.” Was discovered and submitted by J.C. Whish and N.W. Kindersley
- J. John Sullivan, the Collector of Coimbatore, who went up the same year and built a home, had been the first European resident of the hills. The suitability of the climate in this hill was reported by him to the Madras Government. The Europeans soon thereafter settled in the valley for year round and for summer stays. The valley became a summer resort with the British government using the hills for a summer capital.
- K. 19th Century – By the end of 19th century, roads were established, and the railway tracks were constructed and become the tourist spot.

14.4 Tribes in Nilgiris District:

One of the most biodiverse regions of the Western Ghats, the Nilgiris (the blue mountains) comprise part of a larger mountain chain known as the Western Ghats and has been the homeland of native tribal peoples. An important tribe residing in Nilgiri hills are as follows.

14.4.1 Toda:

The Toda people designates a small pastoral community that live on the isolated Nilgiri plateau of Southern India. They traditionally trade dairy products with their Nilgiri neighbors. Toda religion rely on the buffalo, and they perform rituals for all dairy activities. Afforestation by the State Government of Tamil Nadu has also taken a toll on their grazing land. That has threatened to undermine Toda culture by greatly diminishing the buffalo herds. The Kota represent the most closely related people to the Toda, both ethnically and linguistically. The Toda lands now belong to the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve, a UNESCO designated International Biosphere Reserve.

14.4.2 Irula:

The Irula are a Scheduled tribe lives in northern Tamil Nadu and the Nilgiri Hills. They are sort of like a cross between tribals and ordinary southern Indians. Many live in two-room houses with a separate room with a sacred fire. They harvest millet with impossibly small sickles for harvesting individual grain heads. Much of their traditional land has been lost to tea and coffee plantations. The Irula are known for being inspired musicians. They produce their own flutes and drums and are employed by other tribes such as the Toda and Badaga to perform at their funerals.

During Irula funerals a priest goes into trance and is asked by the family of deceased whether the death was natural or the result of sorcery. If the latter is the case a number of rituals are performed before the deceased is buried. After month a stone is placed in a temple to give the deceased a place to stay. The Irula marriage process used to be initiated by a trial cohabitation initiated with a delivery of firewood to the bride's family's house by the groom, but this is no longer practiced. A standard bride price is paid in the presence of elders. The marriage ceremony revolves around the tying of a necklace around the bride's neck. If a wife is unable to produce a child, the husband is allowed to take a second wife. Some women have tattoos and wear toe rings.

14.4.3 Kurumbas:

The Kurumbas are another group that lives in the Nilgiri Hills. There are seven major Kurumba groups: the Alu (milk)-Kurumbas, Palu (milk) -Kurumbas, Betta (hill)-Kurumbas, Jenu (honey)-Kurumbas, Mulla (net)- Kurumbas, Urali (village)-Kurumbas, and Mudugas. Each group is regarded as a separate ethnic group, with its own religious beliefs and other cultural features. There are about 15,000 Kurumbas and about a third of them live in the Nilgiri District. Others are scattered across southern India. The Kurumbas have traditionally been hunters and gatherers. They forage a variety of foods from the forest and hunted and trapped birds and animals. They lived in rock shelters and caves and grew bananas, mangos

and jackfruit in forest gardens. Deforestation had driven them out of their traditional villages into the plains, where they work in tea and coffee plantations. The Kurumbas have a reputation of being sorcerers. Traditionally, the Badaga hired an individual Kurumba man who act as hraduan for a specific village. This was a lifelong job that was passed down from father to son. This individual over agricultural festivals and was employed as a diviner, exorcist. and sed gerbs, spells and rituals to cure the sick. Because of the knowledge of sorcery Kurumba were greatly feared. When bad things happened, they were often blamed.

14.4.4 Nayaka:

The Nayaka are another group that lives in the Nilgiri Hills. Traditionally regarded as honey collectors and people of the forest, they are also known as the Jenu Kurumba, Kattu Naikr, Kattu Nayaka, Naicken, Naikr and Sola Nayaka. They have traditionally lived in huts in the forest and migrated every six to 18 months. There are only around 1,400 of them. Nayaka have no history of animal husbandry or cultivation other than having a few fruit trees near their huts. They have traditionally subsisted primarily on wild yams, nuts, berries and fruit that they collected and fish and trapped animals.

They sometimes hunted deer with dogs. They also collect items from the forest such as medicinal herbs that can be traded for things they need like grain, cooking pots and utensils. They also have worked on plantations and done other work to make money. Nayaka have no formal marriage ceremony. A couple is generally regarded as married when they start sleeping together and sharing the same hearth. The Nayaka are friendly but independent. They generally don't form strong lasting relationships outside their conjugal families. Their religious beliefs are mostly animist with some Hindu deities in their pantheon of gods and spirits. The only life-cycle event that they honor with a ritual is death.

14.5 Customs and Conventions of The Tribes:

The tribes throughout India have the most distinguished customs and conventions which are parallel to preserving the nature. In Tamilandu, the Nilgiris is the protected biosphere area where is the abode of the six primitive tribes namely, Kurumbas, Kattunaickens, Irulas, Todas, Paniyas, Kotas. They lead nature based peculiar life. The Todas life focus on fire making, trees and plant sacredness (Tudr tree), sun worship, moon veneration, reverence of light, stone cult and worship for rain. As the Kattunaicken which means king of the jungle, their economy is based on forest resources. The traditional honey harvesting, and ethno-medical practices are the major role for their economy leading their daily life (Karthikeyan, 2014).

The other tribes Irulas, Paniyas, Kotas, Kurumbas are also dependent upon the forest and its resources for their life system. It is not only in the case of these tribes, but also applicable to throughout India. Hence, the Tribal society is nature based one. The economy for their daily life is determined by forest resources. The forest environment limits and determines their culture. Sometimes, the laws framed by the Government as constitutional laws and other environmental laws disturbing and degrading the tribal life system (Karthikeyan, 2014).

14.6 Houses and Food Habits:

A typical Alu Kurumba village or motta (or kombhai) is made up of five to six huts scattered on the steep wooded slopes of the Nilgiris. Individual huts stand alone on a flattened piece of land and are home to a nuclear family. Constructed from a bamboo backbone with walls made of criss- crossing bamboo strips and grass, they are often fortified with mud and cow dung and support a tiled roof. A small partition, a metre deep and a metre high, divides the interior space into the kitchen and the living or sleeping room. The kitchen or ittumane (food house) has a narrow one-foot-high ledge running the length of a wall. This ledge holds the fireplace and the utensils. Steel vessels have replaced the traditional bamboo vessels and leaves used earlier.

The sleeping room or vagamane serves for all other purposes. The houses open to flattened verandahs or thinnamanne that are used for social purposes. Many of the Kurumbas now live in the government settlements that are brick houses with tin roofs.

The Kurumba ancestors gathered honey and cultivated small patches of raagi, saami and other grains for food and survival. Small patches of coffee and raagi are still grown in the villages though. Coffee and tea are popular drinks.

Even children as young as five are given black sweetened coffee to drink in the mornings. Jackfruit, another plant growing in abundance in the Nilgiris is also eaten in generous quantity in its raw and cooked form. With most of the kurumbas working on the plantation, they have to leave home in the morning and return only after five in the evening. This allows them only two meals (ittu) a day. The meal consists of rice (replacing raagi) and a curry. The kurumbas eat fish, chicken and goat meat. Chewing tobacco and drinking alcohol, irrespective of gender are also popular.

14.7 Types of Marriages:

Marriage is a set of cultural patterns to sanction parenthood and to provide a stable background for the care and rearing of children. The tribal marriages can be classified into the following types:

14.7.1 Monogamy:

In this type of marriage one man married to one woman or one woman marries one man (Chandrakantha, 2014). The husband and wife may or may not be (usually not) related to each other before marriage, most of the Indian tribes practice monogamy.

14.7.2 Polygamy:

It is the marriage of one person with more than one person of the opposite sex (Chandrakantha, 2014). It has two sub types:

(a) Polygyny (b) Polyandry.

(a) Polygyny:

In this type of marriage one man marries to several women. The husband and wives may or may not be related to each other before marriage. Wives may be related among themselves. When the wives are related to each other as sisters it is called as sororal polygyny. If they are not related as sisters, it is called non-sororal polygyny. Polygyny is found among the Naga tribes, the Gond, the Baiga and the Toda. It is also found among the Lushai, Juang and the Kondh. Polygyny is practiced among the tribals due to several reasons (Chandrakantha, 2014). First, it is practiced due to the imbalance of the sex ratio, where women outnumber men. The second reason is that the practice of polygyny accords higher status and prestige.

(b) Polyandry:

Polyandry, marriage of a woman to two or more men at the same time. the term derives from the Greek polys, “many,” and anēr, andros, “man.” When the husbands in a polyandrous marriage are brothers or are said to be brothers, is called adelphic, or fraternal, polyandry. Todas for several centuries practiced polyandry. A Toda woman when married was automatically married to her husband’s brothers (Encyclopedia, 2008).

14.8 Government Schemes for Tribals:

Governor Banwarilal Purohit said that the Central and State Governments were implementing numerous welfare schemes to ensure tribal communities had access to housing, drinking water facilities, sanitation and access to roads and community spaces.

At the Tribal Youth Empowerment and Entrepreneurship Conference was organised to mark the 102nd birth anniversary of the founder of the Nilgiri Adivasi Welfare Association (NAWA), S. Narasimhan here on 17th July 2019, Monday. Mr. Purohit announced that the State Government was running 24 Government Tribal Residential Schools and one Ekalavya model school in the Nilgiris to promote education among tribal communities. “Tribal students receive free education in professional courses for which the Government provides total subsidy.

Recently, the Government sanctioned the construction of 300 houses in Gudalur block alone,” he said, adding that it was important that these facilities were fully utilised by tribal communities. The ultimate goal of both Government and forest dwellers/the tribes is unanimously preserving the forest and natural resources (Karthikeyan, 2014).

There are some suggestions to bring forth to preserve the tribal rights while framing the environmental laws for conservation (Karthikeyan, 2014).

- The role of women, both in conservation and livelihood protection is recognized and protected.
- A new Conservation Law and Forest Law be drafted, with provisions for protecting the indigenous knowledge and rights of indigenous / forest dwelling communities in accordance with the Conservation of Biodiversity.

- The President of India and State Governors should be asked to exercise their powers for withholding the application of forestry laws in scheduled areas with due modification to suit the specific conditions of the areas and the communities living therein.
- The laws related to protected areas and forests will not however, harm the forest dwellers / the tribes.
- When the laws executed, the victims should be properly subsistence.
- The confiscated lands should be given back to the tribes as it is the main resource of their daily life.
- The punitive action must be taken against the officers and authorities those who are violating the environmental laws and tribal laws.
- The laws alienated tribal land should be withdrawn.

Some of the programmes are to develop land use planning for forest area to cultivable area to conserve soil, water and increase productivity of land, economic upliftment of the tribes in an isolated settlement and ensure people participation in all developmental activities (Karthikeyan, 2014).

14.9 Conclusion:

The tribal people in the Nilgiri biosphere of Tamil Nadu, South India have their own culture, language and skill set. Their customs, conventions and livelihood strategies are strongly knitted with environmental elements. The dependence with nature of their culture is unavoidable according to topographical dogmas. Each activity of their life system is nature based. The social set up, economy and not break their relationship with nature. The laws framed by the authority should preserve the life of the tribes and the environment to enhance eco restoration, eco development, eco preservation while taking care of socio- economic and needs of Nilgiris District in Tamil Nadu.

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