

Review Article

THE TODA LANDSCAPE: EXPLORATION IN CULTURAL ECOLOGY

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The review of this book* has been pending on my desk for a long time mainly for two reasons; one I wanted to do a comprehensive review which I am still not going to attempt, second each time I read the book (I have already given it several careful readings in order to comprehend meanings of a complex structure of the Toda life style) I was spellbound by the author who has produced such an outstanding book, the value of which would last forever. His sheer love of labor, monumental patience utmost empathy for the people and his wide knowledge of local geography particularly botany need loads of appreciation. And for the Toda who otherwise appear to be another folk tucked away in the hills of the Nilgiris but have astounding knowledge of the local ecosystem which is inextricably linked with their way of life. In sheer appreciation I bow down to both.

My association with the Nilgiris in general and the Toda in particular has been substantial. Some of the Toda have been my good friends. Most importantly, I had the privilege of knowing Evam Piljen Wiedemann, a Christian Toda lady married to a German. Early in her career she was a nurse trained in England, became a social activist after she returned from England and was most knowledgeable person about the Toda as an insider. The fabulous thing about her was that she was both an insider and also an outsider. She was extremely well in articulation and could communicate with ease in Tamil, English and of course in her mother tongue. She had done a yeoman welfare service to the Toda in general particularly their health. It is said that she saved the Toda from near extinction. It is through her that I learnt a lot about the Toda, their concerns, their inner fissions and the way they resolved them which in fact has enabled them to maintain their dignity, identity though they are a small population and also face enormous existential challenges. That is their huge strength. It was owing to Piljen that I was able to witness two important and rare re- thatching ceremonies of the Toda sacred dairies, besides

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numerous other rituals and was able to attend their council meetings. I would ever remain grateful to her for all this and numerous acts of her generosity and warm hospitality. About the Toda I will hold it for now, let me return to the book.

The Book

The book has a foreword by the noted anthropologist Anthony Walker who has produced an authoritative work on the Toda which took him 25 years to produce (1986), a preface, a guide to the transliteration of the Toda language, a text spread over 13 chapters well illustrated with plates, sketches, maps and appendices, selected bibliography and index. Walker considers the book as a breakthrough in the Toda studies. I will go a step further and state that not only he has set a very high standard of anthropological fieldwork but has opened a refreshing and extremely relevant angle in understanding human behavior. Imagine way back when W.H.R.Rivers decided to do work on the Toda he was reproached for studying 'people about whom we already knew so much' (1906). Since then there have been numerous writings on the Toda, many of them have been done by famous anthropologists or I should say they became famous after studying the Toda, linguists and other scholars and yet Chhabra felt there was much scope for doing another book on the Toda and he has aptly demonstrated why it is so and also indicated numerous other possibilities for more research. Walker writes 'Chhabra's work out shines those of all others-Westerners and Indians alike-in that the data has been acquired exclusively through the researcher's own fluent command of the Toda language. This fact alone is sufficient to make his book stand out in the annals of Toda studies' (xxvii).

Merit of the Book

The book is outstanding for several reasons. It is from a non-anthropologist, actually a practicing dentist settled in Udthagamandalam (earlier popular name was Ooty) who became interested on the Toda. He not only kept his interest alive but intensified it. He is one of the very few non-Toda who can speak the Toda language fluently. His competence in that language is so good that he has produced an authoritative guide for transliteration of the Toda language which will remain most useful contribution to all budding scholars on the Toda. In addition he has produced most valuable document on the Toda sacred chants and authentic data on the fauna, flora and landscape, and shown their connection with the Toda way of life.

In his preface Chhabra clearly states that soon after he began interacting with the Toda he realized 'there was still much important ethnographic data that needed to be collected and analyzed' (xxxiii). Interestingly his curiosity to know more about the Toda began by his getting involved in the Toda prayers leading him to explore rich Toda sacred geography,

sacred hills, sacred waters, fauna and flora. This perusal indeed proved to be proverbial in exploring the complex social structure of the Toda; one door opening into another revealing a rich tapestry of the Toda culture weaving together material and non-material aspects in intricate designs and symbols. It is inspiring to underline that the Chhabra's painstaking work convinced the Toda about his sincerity in exploring the Toda heritage which made them enthusiastic partner in this study and in the process the persistent debate about the observer and observed got dissolved. This in my opinion perhaps is the best example of **participatory anthropology**.

Prologue

Prologue the sub title of which is My Toda Journey is a fascinating section of the book which reveals how Chhabra got involved in the study of the Toda. He earned the trust of the people, so much so that they incorporated him to their fold which allowed him to see the world around through their eyes. Chhabra's sincere involvement with the community attracted the attention of the civic authorities and others concerned with the conservation of the region which also culminated in the formation of the Toda Welfare Society. His concern to conserve the traditional way of life of the Toda is challenging on many counts but has won support most importantly from the young Toda emerging out of schools and colleges which is a positive sign. In summing his Toda journey he underlines as to why his narrative on the Toda is different from what the anthropologist generally write 'I have always endeavored to experience what they have told me for myself. Even in areas in which I was initially inept, like embroidery, I learned the techniques of the traditional patterns before trying them out on a grid-based computer program.' (lxxiii). What follows is a text covered in 13 chapters some of which were written on different occasions for different journals but have been successfully woven, like the Toda embroidery into the Toda Landscape.

The Text

In the first chapter Chhabra introduces the Toda people and their homeland. He briefly discusses the pre-history and history of the Nilgiris, its geography, fauna, flora and the indigenous people of the Nilgiris namely the Toda, the Kota, the Kurumbas and the Irulas who have been occupying the Nilgiris since ancient times. Their interrelationship has been a much discussed topic in anthropological literature. It appears that the long history of the Nilgiris ran on even keel until the Badaga an agricultural community entered the region in 15th century and thereafter there were tumultuous changes once the British entered the Nilgiris in late 18th century. They changed the landscape, demography, traditional economy. They introduced commercial agriculture and exotic plants and laid down new roads and rail lines and occupied a super dominant position. In a way, the perception that the Nilgiris was a secluded

place was altered forever. Forest became a source for revenue earning and traditional rights of the indigenous population on the commons which included forest were extinguished. The forest dwelling populations such as the Kurumbas, the Irulas etc. became persona- non-grata. It was only the Toda who were able to carve out a niche for themselves in the rapidly changing scenario of the Nilgiris and also attracted the attention of the missionaries, authorities as well as hosts of anthropologists. Chhabra's observation, 'Toda were often engaged to assist the British gentry when they were out hunting game and quite a few apparently suffered serious injuries' (p.13) is quite revealing to understand the local dynamics of interrelationship. Chhabra underlines the fact that the Nilgiris present some distinctive landscape, a wide variety of habitats of which shola grasslands are the most prominent and so also its fauna and flora. Nilgiri plateau constitutes the core of the Nilgiri Biodiversity Reserve.

In the second chapter, Chhabra introduces the distinctive features of the Toda society and its linkages with the landscape. The Toda have fascinated people with their quaint barrel-vaulted temples and homes, their striking embroidered cloaks, polyandry and their magnificent long-horned buffaloes. Both the Toda and their breed of buffaloes are restricted to the Nilgiris. Their way of life revolves around their herds. They have six grades of dairy-temple; each has its corresponding herd of sacred buffaloes. 'Only a man who has become a priest following the elaborate ordination ceremonies specific to each grade, may milk the corresponding grade of sacred buffaloes, and ritually process the milk into butter, buttermilk, curd and ghee'(p.27). Chhabra says that the rituals that go into the sacred dairying process are so elaborate that a few volumes will be required to describe them. However, Chhabra has successfully woven through this mass of data and like a master craftsman has presented a clear and understandable story of the Toda. The Toda believe that once gods and goddesses lived among humans but later took residences in the nearby hills. Their goddess created their buffaloes and divided her people into two divisions and a number of clans and also sacred chants associated with sacred places and other natural landmarks. Finally their God decided to establish an abode where the spirits of the deceased Toda would reside provided they have performed all the rites of passage during their life-time. It is indeed remarkable that Chhabra has clearly presented an outline of the Toda cosmology.

The third chapter is about the Toda clans, their hamlets and other sacred places. There are fifteen extant patrilineal clans, some have become extinct and some have emerged besides matrilineal clans. Every Toda patrilineal clan belongs to one of two endogamous divisions (the earlier authors recognized it as moiety). Each of the clans owns a number of hamlets which include both dwelling units and sacred dairy-temples. According to Chhabra there are 75 Toda hamlets both permanent and seasonal besides funeral sites which are not occupied but

are only used to perform funeral rites. These are some basic constituents of the Toda society but when they are put in operation along with their stratified sacred dairies and corresponding grade of buffaloes the complexities of the Toda social structure and its integration with the local ecology and their cosmology begins to unfold. Chhabra has done a stupendous job of documenting the distribution of all the settlements and the clans occupying them

The fourth chapter is all about fascinating Toda dress and the embroidery on the cloaks men and women drape themselves particularly on all ritual occasions. The dead must go on the journey to the afterworld draped in a cloak embroidered by the wife of the deceased and in case of female it is done by a close female relative. The cloaks must be worn in a particular manner particularly on all ritual occasions which is different the way the dead is draped. Chhabra has painstakingly provided the details of the patterns embroidered on their cloaks most of which are inspired by the local ecology. The Toda embroidery has become famous and at present times has a good market. The traditional embroidery motifs now commonly seen on the Toda cloaks used to adorn the corpse.

The fifth chapter is a detailed case study of a seasonal hamlet which is occupied in dry season. Through this case we learn about the mythological roots of this hamlet, the landmarks around the hamlet and the functions assigned to each, the migration to it, ordination of the priest designate and thereafter the rituals that follow in the dairy-temple and the seasonal hamlet. The first thing the priest does in the morning when he emerges from the dairy temple is to salute the rising sun in a specific way where a clear distinction is maintained between right hand which 'has the potent capacity to harness divine energy' (162) and left hand which has much less power. While performing this morning salutation he utters the sacred syllable 'saww' which author believes is cognate of 'swami' meaning god. In the afternoon when the dairyman-priest enters the temple a series of rituals follow including lighting of sacred lamp through an ember and recitation of prayers. All through the priest as well as others strictly follows the norms relating to the purity status of the sacred dairy-temple, priests and sacred spaces. Adult women are prohibited entering these spaces. Facets of domestic life, reconstruction and repair of the houses and their architecture are described in detail and also the celebrations that follow which are dances, recitations of instantaneously composed poetry and finally feast in which only their traditional fare is served. Just before it is time to return to their permanent hamlets they perform some essential rituals and conclude it with two pilgrimages. The first of which is to a Hindu temple located in a Badaga village and second is to a hill top which Toda believe is the seat of the deity which protects their hamlets. The rituals they perform there and pilgrimages they undertake 'represents another way by which Toda attempt to maintain the sanctity of their environment' (199).

The sixth chapter is about the traditional Toda relationship with honey

which permeates many aspects of their life. Honey is an important constituent of their traditional diet particularly at sacred dairy-temple ceremonies. The Toda honey gatherers use neither smoke nor any other irritant in extracting the outer portion of the honeycombs. They leave the brood portion untouched for regeneration, thus they employ 'a very ecologically-friendly way of extracting honey from his environment' (204). For the Toda honey gathering can be undertaken only by those who are ritually pure. They recite some prayers before extracting honey as well as afterwards and perform certain rituals. In conclusion Chhabra underlines that honey has been a sacred component of ancient Indian culture and quotes a verse from *Birhadaranyaka Upanishad* which has a section on *Madhu Brahmana* (Treatise on Honey).

The seventh chapter is about the structure and occupancy of a conical dairy temple at Konawsh which has a high sacred status. The structure of conical dairy is distinctive which Chhabra has meticulously described with detailed sketches and photographs. In this particular case the existing dairy temple was disintegrating and hence had to be pulled down and reconstructed. Each stage of dismantling and reconstruction is performed with appropriate rituals in which removal of sacred equipments by the priest to a temporary barrel-vaulted dairy-temple is an essential task where those equipments would remain till the new one is ready to be commissioned. At all stages purity status of the people participating in it has to be maintained. It is not only the women but three symbols of womanhood namely broom, winnowing tray and pestle are considered polluting and hence are kept away. Each step of reoccupancy is accomplished by performing appropriate rituals in which sacred bath at specified places, application of sandalwood paste on forehead and other parts of body are essential. Since they strongly believe that the purity status of this sacred dairy complex should not be contaminated in any ways so much so that leaf plates on which food has been consumed should not touch the hallowed ground and hence are impaled on a stick and later discarded at a specified place. It is interesting to highlight that the Toda believe that leaf plate on which food has been consumed gets polluted which is a common belief of the Hindus in India, further those polluted plates when thrown on the ground would transmit the pollution to the sacred ground. Chhabra has diligently described first and second day occupancy of the dairy temple, and special ceremonies associated with the dairy temple highlighting the rituals and associated prayers. The annual occupancy of the dairy temple lasts for one lunar month. Thereafter the temple dairy is ceremoniously closed. The outgoing priest relinquishes his priesthood by touching a domestic bamboo vessel and putting his hand in a domestic stream. The author opines that in the past that Konawsh dairy temple was occupied by the entire families but later owing to an unfortunate incident it was decided that at the settlement at Konawsh no female would be allowed in order to protect its purity. This is how Konawsh became a hamlet away from any inhabited place where only the dairy priest and his assistant reside during its occupancy.

The chapters 8th and 9th are about sacred peaks and sacred waters.

These two chapters indicate the intimate relationship of the Toda with the local ecology. The description is fascinating and is an invaluable record of the knowledge of the Toda of their surroundings and is very well illustrated with sketches, photographs and appropriate legends. The author concludes the chapter by reminding the urban dwellers the world over 'people like the Toda actually utilize only a miniscule portion of these waters that they have guarded for millennia' (357).

The 10th chapter is about the most fascinating aspect of the Toda culture that is their concept of the afterworld and how the spirits of the dead reach there. They believe that once upon a time before their great goddess, it was her father Aihn who ruled over the Toda, realized that the spirits of his people had no place to go after death. The gods met in a council and identified a place where the Toda would live after death. Aihn on his way to the afterworld climbed up a series of hills, cooked food, rested and pressed his chest against a particular rock after which he forgot all worldly attachments and finally after a long trek across many obstacles he reached a place where he established 'afterworld'. The Toda identify all the landmarks of the route taken by Aihn and strongly believe that if during his/her life time a Toda has correctly observed all the sacred rituals the spirit of the deceased would go through the same route and reach 'afterworld' where he/she would live exactly as the people in the world of this side. Therefore, in the death rituals, the dead are sent off with all those things which a Toda requires in his day to day life. The Toda death rituals are elaborate and they conceptualize that the spirit of the dead goes for a long and arduous journey where the tragedy of sad demise as well as expectation of reaching the final destination in the company of the other deceased Toda is movingly enacted. The strength of the chapter lies in the fact that Chhabra himself travelled to those spots which the Toda identify as the physical landmarks of the mythical journey undertaken by the spirits. The Toda identify the numerous hills where their legendary deities inhabit which Chhabra has tried to document through sketch of the route and photographs. Chhabra in conclusion writes 'it is apparent the Todas' insistence on scrupulously following their rites of passage is linked to their belief in the afterworld, and the journey that the spirits of their departed must undertake to reach it. As long as their belief in their afterworld remains, it is likely that Toda will continue to practice the most important aspects of their culture' (382)

The 11th chapter though is about the ecological knowledge of the Toda also shows Chhabra's deep understanding, appreciation and concern of Nilgiri botany. Chhabra observes that the Toda are able to discern the character of the various plants and flowers, their medicinal or toxic properties and their natural cycle as indicator of the season. He has meticulously described and illustrated the annual cycle of the vegetation of the Toda universe.

The 12th chapter discusses four species of plants which have special significance for the Toda and the function they play in their life and imagination. The Toda are able to identify a vast number of plants of the region and know

therapeutic and utilitarian value of most of them as well as their botanical complexities.

The 13th chapter describes Balsams of the Nilgiris. The chapter though in itself is informative about the species which has a variety in the Nilgiris seems to me a bit out of place in this book.

The last section of the book is Epilogue where the author reflects on the values of the Toda and what relevance they have for the modern world. The Toda life has irrevocable bonds with natural environment mythically as well as in practice. The author recollects that when he began to interact with the Toda in 1990 he got the impression that they were on crossroad but there has been some attempt by young Toda to revitalize their culture which gets reflected in rebuilding long –abandoned dairy temples and seasonal hamlets. Though the challenges the Toda face are formidable the author feels the Toda value system has remained strong.

The six appendices that follow namely Flora Associated with the Toda People, Fauna Associated with the Toda People, Toda Landscape and Almanac Terminology, Toda Sacred Chants, Traditional Food Habits and Buffalo Terminology contain wealth of data and show comprehensive coverage of the Toda landscape.

Overview

The Toda are one of the most studied communities by a variety of people such as casual observers, administrators, missionaries and trained scholars. The celebrated monograph of W.H.R.Rivers came out in 1906 but before that several others had put out their observations on them; the earliest in English language was that of Giacomo Feincio an Italian Jesuit priest in 1603. Unfortunately we do not know the early history of the Toda. This is an area where much work is required to be done in order to have an informed perspective about the indigenous communities in India in general and of the Nilgiris in particular. At the time when River's book on the Toda was published it soon became a rage and Rivers was hailed for his discovery of genealogical method but over years his influence in the development of social anthropology waned and in late 1960s the assessment of well known anthropologists like Radcliffe -Brown, Firth, Fortes was critical, the latter going to the extent of saying that though he was first to start the research on kinship in Britain but 'his basic hypotheses were absurd'(Rooksby 1971:110). We leave that assessment here as it is not relevant for this review but Rivers is important because it was his book on Toda that inspired Chhabra to become interested in the community. In this connection, I would like to underline two things one, though Rivers came to India to retest the genealogical method he had discovered in Torres Strait, his single minded focus on it led him to cover the entire life cycle of the Toda and second the accuracy of his data and the details which he pursued, in spite of several hurdles, setting a very high standard in anthropological fieldwork. But before I do that it will be worthwhile to know a little about the

Rivers. There is some commonality between Rivers and Chhabra, both were non-trained anthropologists. While Rivers was a foreigner in India, Chhabra has settled down in the Nilgiris and has reached out to the Toda through his dental practice and numerous welfare measures in which he is directly or indirectly involved.

Rivers grew in England at the time when unilinear evolution was a dominant theme and the scholars were looking for evidence to determine the stages of development and that is how the populations which were considered to be 'primitive' the world over came in for urgent focus of the western scholars. Urgent because it was believed that the 'primitive' communities were changing fast and hence whatever was still there should be recorded. Lewis H. Morgan's works particularly *Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity* was a strong influence on Rivers. Rivers received medical training and practiced for a while but he got drifted towards experimental psychology. As event turned out to be he joined A.C.Haddon, leader of the Cambridge Anthropological expedition to Torres Straits as a psychologist but returned as an ethnographer having conceived the idea of his famous 'genealogical method of anthropological enquiry'. In Torres Strait he began collecting genealogical relationship to supplement his psychological study, in the process he discovered how extensive and apparently accurate was the native knowledge of their kinship' (ibid: 110). On his return, he remained engrossed in writing on genealogical method and wrote several articles elaborating the function and purpose of genealogy. He was keen to confirm that genealogy would provide concrete evidence on marriage rules, inheritance, and succession to office and the relationship of the people participating in rituals. With these thoughts he came to India to work among some 'primitive tribes' in south India but finally decided to work on the Toda though he was initially discouraged on the ground that already much was known about the Toda. But small size of the community, practice of polyandry, relative isolation, having two moieties and availability of some literature on them made him to decide to work on the Toda.

It is important to underline that his fieldwork among the Toda was just for five months. He had no exposure to any of the south Indian languages. He worked through two interpreters in succession both of them were Tamil speaking Christians and it will be safe to assume that they did not know the Toda language. It is now only that the Toda are fluent in Tamil. Therefore, perhaps all the conversation took place in Badgu the language spoken by the Badaga who had emerged as a dominant community of the Nilgiris and their language had become lingua franca of the region. One of the criticisms is that the Toda in Rivers' book were being seen from the eyes of the Badaga. That criticism may be valid to some extent. However, let us try to reconstruct the conditions in which Rivers was working among the Toda. Rivers was new to south India and for him interpretation was being done in multiple languages - Toda to Badagu, Badagu to English through Tamil speaking interpreters who

perhaps had rudimentary knowledge of Badgu. One may ask as to how far these interpreters could translate into English what they heard from the Toda and how much they were able to understand what Rivers spoke to them in his British English. These are questions for which we do not have adequate answers but the fact remains that there were so many linguistic and cultural hurdles. In spite of the short duration of his field work, linguistic and cultural obstacles, and that he did not stay with the people but in a separate bungalow which means he was not able to supplement what he was learning from his interpreters through his own observations, he produced an extraordinary great work overlooking some factual errors and the ideological absurdities of his time. For example, like many others before him as well as others after him were over enthusiastic including Prince Peter to establish their origin from somewhere other than Nilgiris. Also at that time believe in evolution was a matter of faith- words like primitive, savage, *jungly* came out flowing. This is indeed surprising because Rivers demonstrates a scientific bent of mind and that is how he had discovered the genealogical method. One of the reviewers of his book way back in 1907 writes ‘The Todas would present a most remarkable object lesson in evolution, if as Mr. Rivers suggests, they should, under European influence, now evolve from polyandry through group marriage into monogamy’(Swanton 1907:198). If we set these flaws aside Emeneau who did a paper on the Toda after 35 years (1938), 80 years later Walker produced a comprehensive and excellent monograph (1986) and Chhabra 109 years later vouch that Rivers in his monograph on the Toda did not miss much. This is indeed remarkable which perhaps can be explained by his determination to establish the study of culture and society as a science. Mandelbaum writes, ‘his student and colleague, John Layard recalled that Rivers had once said that he would like to have his tombstone inscribed with word “he made ethnology a science”’ (1980:280). That is indeed laudable but the question is as to why he did not challenge the simplistic evolutionary theory though much later he himself admitted that he was ‘then under the sway of crude evolutionary doctrine...’ (Rivers 1914: vi). This bias has very much remained in the ethnography of forest dwellers in India overlooking the long and complex history of the country and its civilization. In this context it is worthwhile to quote in full what Kroeber wrote way back in 1935 ‘Rivers, with his “History of Melanesian Society” is the classic case of man of undoubtedly very high ability trying to apply a laboratory type of formula-he was trained in physiology and psychology –to a historical problem. His “Todas,” though valuable for its new observations, shows the same lack of realization of there being such a thing as pertinent historical approach. This strange little culture, obviously a specialized modification at innumerable points of the higher Indian culture, is treated with scant reference to this context; although its relation to this the most significant problem which it presents.’ (1935:550). Notwithstanding Kroeber’s observations, ethnographic studies of communities as isolates in India have continued unabated. The problematic of ethnographic studies of communities

in oriental societies has remained unresolved. There are several issues. One, the temptation is to get immersed in the structure and function of different aspects of a community with the hope that it is likely to yield some deeper understanding of human behavior. What they describe cannot be questioned but it has to be conceded that those aspects of the community have not been carved out in complete isolation of the larger context- the sum is greater than the parts. Further, there is another pitfall, the category of primitive or savage acts like a blind spot. It refuses to acknowledge their capabilities of abstract thinking and their wisdom in relational epistemology. It is assumed that the 'primitive' are chasing food all the time and are 'immediate return people' disregarding their complicated social structures, symbols loaded with subtle everlasting values, and presenting a vibrant images of cosmos which has been so perceptively highlighted by Chhabra in his book on the Toda. Look the way Rivers tied himself in knots, having done a detailed scientific study of the Toda society he refuses to concede that the Toda are capable of appreciating beauty (Misra 2007:152). There is a methodological as well as theoretical problem too. In case of oral societies it is simply impossible for an outsider to get into the mind of insiders and reach to the constructs they have in their minds. Besides, the issue of ethics, as to how much one can objectify the other society would always remain. My friend Dr. Satyanarayanan, a distinguished anthropologist who has worked on the Nilgiris for decades tells me that he has given up probing the Toda for a simple reason that for the same ritual or tradition there are multiple versions. It may be a problem for Dr Satyanarayanan or for an anthropologist because their focus is to get a 'correct' version which is not an issue with the Toda. Their traditions are not meant for relating stories or providing objective reasons for it, devoid of passion and emotions but to live it. For them the same phenomenon could be called by different names depending upon the context as long as the meaning they are deriving does not contradict their basic tenets. Moreover the Toda or for that matter any community cannot be frozen in time. They continuously respond, adapt and react to the situation within and without. They are not immune to developing contradictions. Taking such factors into account disturbs the neat narrative that anthropologists want to create. Finally it boils down to the question is: whether dispassionate scientific study of the societies ever possible?

What do we learn?

Since so much literature is available on the Toda we should repeatedly ask the question as to what we learn from them.

It has been firmly established that the Toda are an ancient community and they are like numerous other Hindu communities found all over India: practicing their own rituals as well as of popular Hinduism of the region (Walker 1986:297). It is indeed remarkable that though the Toda are a small community and are tucked away in a part of the Nilgiris, they have tenaciously held on

their identity much of it has to do with their culture which is not frozen. They continuously negotiate, interpret, reinterpret and adapt in encountering the dominant culture of their surroundings. They have strong articulations with the larger Hindu system such as hill peaks being the abode of god and goddesses, a strong believe in the idea of pollution which can be got rid of by performing appropriate rituals and bath, making a clear distinction between sacred and non-sacred spaces and water, pollution of food owing to saliva touch, birth, death, menstruation and sexual intercourse, drawing a clear line between sacred right and not so sacred left, cattle dung as one of the purifying agents, calendar guided by the cycle of moon, believe in after world and numerous other such practices and symbols. On the other there are many aspects which are unique to them such as their life revolving around their buffaloes which are sacredly graded, sacred dairies which can be run by only ordained priest, maintain conical sacred dairies, practice of polyandry, embroidered dress, their vault dome homesteads and numerous rituals of which paternity and funeral are most outstanding.

Also outstanding is the fact though their society is oral they have maintained their traditions for which enough evidence has been provided by so many studies on them. On the face of it may appear that oral transmission of knowledge allows some leeway in improvising which it certainly does like Indian classical music but does not radically deviate from the main *raga*. In case of the Toda besides numerous taboos and restrictions public performances and repetitions of rituals narrows down the possibility of major deviation. There is another blind spot that literate societies consider orality as inferior form of knowledge which needs to be eradicated. This may be a wrong perception but the bottom line is oral languages and cultures are endangered world over. The Toda cannot be an exception. Keya Acharya, an environmental journalist asserts 'The Todas of the Nilgiris are as endangered a community as their most sacred and beloved... buffalo' quoted by Cederlof and Sutton (2006: 162). The Toda are facing numerous challenges; demographically they have become a miniscule population in the region, over years there has been rapid urban expansion, rapid expansion of commercial agriculture too. Their grazing lands have been gobbled by numerous development projects. There has been determined effort to convert the Toda as agriculturists. Their children are increasingly being brought into the fold of modern education which has least concern for indigenous knowledge. And above all mainstreaming the indigenous people is a thought which is globally sweeping. Under the circumstances it is no less a wonder that the Toda have retained their identity so far, enabling Chhabra to record their way of life and their finest values. The way Chhabra has portrait them the Toda could be considered as one of the few most peaceful people in the world who are not only sensitive to all living beings as well as nature. It is not only the future generation of the Toda would learn about their ancestors from this book but the entire humanity would be grateful to

learn that such a people existed on this planet till at least a part of 21st century.

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