



# Preserving Indigenous Identity: A Study of Traditional Customs among the Toda Tribe

T. Tamizharuvi<sup>1</sup> & Dr.M. Nageshwari<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of History

PSGR Krishnammal College for Women, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of History

PSGR Krishnammal college for women, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu



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## Abstract

*This article explains the value of preserving the Toda community's indigenous identity in a modern context by looking at their practices. The Toda community is located in the Nilgiri hills. The article discusses the history of the community, its social organization, and cultural practices such as dress, religion, life-cycle rituals, and oral histories, combining fieldwork and secondary materials. The article also addresses the effects of migration, urbanization, and changes in social values on the Toda way of life and also partners in the efforts of the Toda community and others, to preserve the culture. The article ends by asserting the importance of cultural practice and suggests ways of preserving that culture into the future.*

**Keywords:** Toda Tribe, indigenous identity, cultural preservation, traditional customs, modernization, intangible heritage

## Introduction

The Nilgiri Hills of Tamil Nadu are home to several tribal cultures that have lived in harmony with nature for many generations. The Nilgiri region, which is part of the Western Ghats, is important ecologically and culturally, because it is made up of tribal communities and tribal identities which maintain distinct customs, beliefs, and practices (Hockings, 1999). Tamil Nadu recognizes 36 Scheduled Tribes encompassing six Particularly Vulnerable Tribes (PVTGs), these are Kattunaickens, Kotas, Kurumbas, Irulas, Paniyans, and Todas (Government of Tamil Nadu, 2020). The Toda tribe is noted for its social organization, elaborate rituals, and connection to the land (Aiyappan, 1948; Walker, 1996). The preservation of indigenous identity has

gained significance regarding today's rapidly changing world. Globalization, technological advancement, and cultural homogenization create pressing challenges to protecting tribal heritage. The Todas must confront the strong anticipation of continuing their intangible traditions—including oral culture, intimate values, and practices in a modern world—characterizing a tribal identity that is often both precarious and profound. This study looks into the Toda tribe's traditional activities as a vivid expression of indigenous identity, including the problems and constraints to maintaining these practices, as well as numerous programs for cultural renewal and sustainability.

### Background of The Toda Tribe

The Toda tribe is one of the oldest and most unique indigenous groups in the Nilgiri Hills. They are among the earliest settlers in the area, having lived for generations on the up-per plateau while maintaining a deep bond with nature (Aiyappan, 1948; Walker, 1996). Oral traditions provide the community's historical narrative, given that written accounts of their past do not exist. Colonial anthropologists detailed various aspects of Toda life, customs, and practices (Emeneau, 1935-1963). The Todas had traditionally settled in small, scattered communities, known as munds, consisting of a number of barrel-shaped huts made from bamboo and thatch, representing specific clans. Their economy was primarily pastoral with buffalo rearing as the mainstay of their existence. Today, buffalo continue to be an important aspect of their diet, rituals, and social structure (Aiyappan, 1948).

Previously, the Todas lived in small, scattered settlements, called munds, found throughout the high-altitude grasslands of Nilgiris. A mund would usually consist of multiple barrel-shaped huts made of bamboo and thatch, and it would be associated with a clan. Todas were primarily pastoralists that relied mainly on buffalo rearing as their way of life. Buffaloes were pivotal to their livelihood, their social organization, and their rituals. Although the Todas rely principally on buffalo milk for sustenance, it is also important in their religious and ceremonial practices.



**Toda Buffalo**

### Social Organization of Todas

The Toda language, part of the Dravidian language family, differs from Tamil and Kannada. Now it is only spoken by a few hundred people, making it one of the world's critically endangered languages. Since there is no writing system for the Toda language, it has

been maintained only by speaking as the community has a strong oral tradition like other In-digenous peoples.

Tartharol (Therthar) and Teivaliol (Theviliyal) make up the two main groups in the a patrilineal clan structure of Todas society. Because of exogamy (the principal through which people must marry outside their clan), the two-groups structure differentiates the social identity of the community and social relationship patterns. Tartharol is considered the priestly or sacred group and is responsible for the community grave yards, sacred buffalo temples and religious rites; Teivaliol represents the lay or secular group that manage the day-to-day tasks and practical matters of Cada life. Within each moiety are smaller sub-groups or clans, each of which is given a specific set of ritual responsibilities attached to that group, along with specific sacred sites or sacred locations. This multi-layered social structure is at the heart of Toda cultural life. It defines ritual obligations, reinforces family bonds, and encourages a deep sense of fellowship and community.

The Toda society experienced changes in the nineteenth century with the British arrival. New governance, land use policies, and educational systems from colonial administrators and missionaries slowly transformed traditional lifestyles. Buffalo herds began to decline, ancestral lands began to be encroached upon, and many munds were relocated. Western anthropologists were very interested in documenting Toda culture at this time, but their descriptions often reflected outside, idealized perspectives rather than the community's own understanding. These colonial encounters did not only disrupt the traditional structures of the Toda people but also created new cultural changes that continue to affect their daily lives.



**Traditional Toda House (mund) and Modern Toda House**



### Traditional Customs and Practices

The Toda tribe adheres to various old traditions that remain fundamental to their way of life and community. The oral traditions that lie behind these customs, covering a range of cultural spheres, depict a worldview deeply rooted in spiritual harmony, symbolism, and nature. Of all its various cultural expressions, traditional dress is often the most significant as it serves utilitarian and symbolic purposes. Both men and women wear the putkuli, a traditional garment which can be recognized by its vivid embroidery, red and black, on a white background. The extensive geometric patterns on these handwoven shawls often signify clan affiliation or ceremonial importance. The embroidery of the putkuli is created by the Toda women and can also be seen as an art form that demonstrates the creativity, skill and pride of the Toda culture. In fact, in further legitimizing the putkuli's cultural heritage, a Geographical Indication (GI) tag was awarded to reinforce the authenticity and cultural relevance of this tradition as heritage craft.



**Toda men dancing in front of their temple with their traditional dress**

Toda religious culture centers around the buffalo, which is considered a sacred being and a vessel of spiritual energy rather than livestock. Their temples, usually small barrel-shaped structures, are considered highly sacred places and serve as repositories of buffalo milk. Priests selected who have strict standards for chastity and spiritual discipline perform the services in the temples. Rituals of worship are highly symbolic, and timed closely to seasonal cycles showing the Toda people's sustained commitment to the natural world, ancestral spirits, and unobservable powers that are believed to support existence.

Life cycle ceremonies support personal and social identity by marking the important passages of life: birth, puberty, marriage, and death. Naming a newborn is viewed as a sacred act, to be taken only after prescribed purification ceremonies are completed. Before the individual can be reintegrated back into society, they go through a short, symbolic period of isolation in a puberty ceremony, which is done respectfully and with care, especially for girls. Marriages between two different moieties, which were traditionally arranged within the tribe, have specific ceremonial connotations. The forms of fraternal polyandry that were once practiced have virtually gone extinct. Offerings of buffalo milk are the main element of the marriage ceremonies, which are often held on or near important and respected dairy temples.

The Todas secure the soul's harmonious journey to the spiritual world by conducting cremation rites at the end of life that include sacred chants, ritualistic offerings, and collective participation. The Toda people uphold their spiritual core of their indigenous identity through a worldview in which tradition, faith, and nature are all deeply intertwined through these rich and complex customs.



**Death Ritual of Toda People**

### Symbols of Identity

The identity of the Toda tribe is sustained via a range of material and immaterial cultural symbols - which are endowed with important historical and spiritual meaning - as well as their specific practices and behaviors. These symbols affirm the community's determination, continuity, and respect for tradition, and they can be experienced much like a window into their daily lives and serve as actual memorials to memory and tradition.

Traditional architecture is another way of manifesting the identity of the Toda people. Every house, or mund, is constructed from mud, bamboo, and thatch in a semi-barrel shape, pinpointed by their



distinctively engraved door openings and the absence of windows. This style reflects the aesthetic values of balance and simplicity, as well as superior craftsmanship, necessary to respond to the mountainous cold climate. More than that, the munds are significant in terms of the traditional temples based upon the same form. The designs use sacred geometry which reflects the Toda perspective of spirituality and place, as well as their relationship with nature, in an even more profound way.



### **A Toda Temple**

The oral tradition preserves the collective history of the Toda community. Stories, chants, and songs are handed down through generations and are usually shared at rituals or social occasions. These stories represent stories of Toda identity, myths, genealogies, tribal traditions, and ecological knowledge. Much of the folklore is associated with the Nilgiri Hills and related to the sacred buffalo, symbolizing a relationship with their ancestors and environment. Elders are also an essential part of this oral tradition. Elders are honored because of age, but also as stewards of custom, knowledge, and ritual practice. Their roles in decision making, storytelling, and ritual practice contribute to the preservation and authentic transmission of cultural knowledge. These cultural symbols, whether collective, oral, or architectural, coalesce to create a fabric of Toda identity that represents a communal identification with their past, but is also relevant to modern life; thus, they are not artifacts from the past, but not static and never lacking change.

### **Challenges to Cultural Preservation**

The Toda tribe is increasingly struggling to stay true to their cultural heritage in light of rapid social and economic change. While they maintain a relatively distinct and notable culture, over time changes have

reformulated customs and heightened concern that an indigenous sense of identity may not persist. Although the Nilgiris has not escaped development, urbanization, and touristic growth, to become aware of the Todas' way of life has been particularly challenging, alongside new aspirations that travel by road and a technology-based, urbanized society favor. Development, which the Todas did not know, compounds challenges, and while development has consequences, both traditions do not flourish when detached from the institution of tradition. The customs, clothing, and homes which attract tourists ultimately led to one result - tourists experience living traditions as visual entertainments, and thereby ignorance converts religion into cultural commoditization.

Another challenge is youth migration. Many Todas migrate to work or attend school in urban settings. As young Todas assimilate into city life, their connection to the Toda language, customs, and values erodes. Thus, the transference of knowledge systems dependent on oral tradition is also disrupted.

Education offers empowerment, but it is twofold. Young tribal members are empowered by new opportunities to advance. However, they are also subjected to dominant cultures, which serve to devalue their own concepts of culturally defined ideas. The lack of education that nourishes and respects traditional knowledge and values only hastens the erosion of ideas.

Community dynamics add even greater pressures. While some younger community members advocate for certain practices in response to religious or modern ideologies, others explicitly question traditional practices. The tradition's meaning and authenticity are often stripped away by performing the rituals piecemeal. The resilience of Toda culture is at even greater risk when inquiry into identity and community values, and rituals is reviewed freely as migration, modernization, changing value systems, and disconnection from nature. Therefore, there is a greater need than ever to protect their intangible heritage.

### **Efforts at Cultural Revival**

In response to internal and external pressures on their heritage, the Toda community has created and implemented several initiatives to preserve





cultural traditions or encourage revitalization. These initiatives recognize and demonstrate a revitalized sense of identity, resilience, and hope that ensures Toda traditions will continue to exist and thrive in the contemporary world.

The community is at the center of the revival. Elders and cultural leaders have begun to reintroduce young people to traditionally based customs, rituals, and values. One of the ways is through cultural festivals, social gatherings, and reenactments, which pass on oral traditions, songs, and life-cycle rituals that contribute to a person's identity as a Toda person. These knowings will serve to maintain cultural continuity and intergenerational connections in the community. When it comes to conserving and furthering their cultural practice, the Toda women are immensely relevant. They have become notable practitioners of pugur, the traditional embroidery style of the Toda, and have been an important entity to promoting, conserving and introducing this particular style of embroidery. The geometric designs rich in symbolic meaning are taught and utilized by a group of Toda women, and have gained international recognition, receiving the designation of Geographical Indication (GI). Furthermore, Toda women's craft preserves their cultural designs and knowledge while simultaneously generating economic wealth for their community and family through their traditional practice.



#### **A Toda Woman making Traditional Embroidery**

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) began these initiatives by supporting the Toda community by promoting education, documenting endangered cultural practices, and advocating for eco-cultural tourism centered on indigenous values. In addition, NGOs have supported Toda agency in cultural preservation by allowing the Toda community

to reclaim and represent their stories to be told by supporting platforms for their voices to be heard.

At the institutional level, the drive to preserve Toda culture comes from government programs, particularly the benefits the Toda people have received from the Tribal Welfare Department. This provides a systematic basis for preserving tribal art, language, and livelihood. Economic or traditional success is facilitated through programs that provide the community with skill development workshops, community-based tourism, or scholarship programs both to connect traditional practices to new opportunities. Government and institutional efforts are supported by new international recognition through, the Toda people's, combined ecological and cultural traditions, UNESCO recognition of Toda sacred groves and cultural landscape in the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve. This strengthens the significance of preserving biodiversity, in addition to the systems of cultural knowledge, which exist in harmonious reciprocity to the system.

Recently, new efforts to formally engage traditional knowledge with formal education and tourism have had a more progressive developmental history. Now, community-run schools and training centers are integrating indigenous knowledge with local formal education, to provide students not only with the academic learnings they receive, but also with the values, customs, and stories that articulate their identities as Todas. Overall, these initiatives have shown that cultural renewal is an intentional process that adapts and takes advantage of current educational opportunities and remains substantive, not contrary to preserving traditions and a necessary part of societal progress.

#### **Conclusion**

An indigenous group that has tried to maintain its identity in a changing context is the Toda community of the Nilgiri Hills. In this study, it is evident that the cultural vitality of the Todas exists in the everyday care of practices, social organization, and meaning. The Todas are a culture that has developed over many hundreds of years of living with the world, as seen in their unique dress and ritual, their clan-based social organization, and the sacred architecture they build. However, the challenge of any group trying to



maintain cultural relevance becomes much more of a challenge when facing migration, modernization, and changing so-cial values. Regardless, the inner strength of the Toda is evident through initiatives of the community, women, NGOs, and ongoing international recognition from bodies like UNESCO, which serves as the basis for continued revitalization and a continuation of Toda cultural practices. Current work to embed traditional knowledge into tourism and education provides uses for sustainability and revitalization, so that Toda heritage might continue as part of their current shared experience instead of an absence from history. Ultimately, preserving and living culture and intangible heritage is about more than the past; it is about enriching the present and imagining a future that is more diverse and inclusive. The experience of the Toda community offers a reminder that preservation is a collaborative endeavor but requires collab-oration, respect, and pride and purpose.

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