PrimitiVe Tribal Groups of Nilgiri District (PTGS)

Tamil Nadu, one of the major states of the southern zone in India, consists of important tribal groups. According to the 2001 census, the Scheduled Tribe population in Tamil Nadu is 651321 (328917 males and 322404 females) constituting 1.04 per cent of the total general population. There are thirty six Scheduled Tribes of varying numerical strengths in the state. Most of the Scheduled Tribes live in hilly and remote areas by primitive subsistence living and a large number of them are food gatherers by tradition and they are widely distributed in all thirty districts in Tamil Nadu state. The literacy rate of the tribes is 41.53 per cent. 90.31 per cent of the tribals live in hilly/rural areas and 9.69 per cent of them live in urban (town) areas. Tribal communities live in about 15 per cent of the country's areas, in various ecological and geoclimatic conditions ranging from plains, forests, hills and inaccessible areas.

In Tamil Nadu, out of 36 Scheduled Tribes, the Government of India identified six tribal communities as PRIMITIVE TRIBAL GROUPS (PTGs) on the basis of a pre-agriculture level of technology, a stagnant or declining population, extremely low literacy and a subsistence level of economy. These six PTGs are

1. Todas
2. Kotas
3. Kurumbas
4. Irulas
5. Paniyans
6. Kattunayakans

Surprisingly, all these six PTGs are found in the Nilgiri District. Each of these tribes maintaining unique cultural traits. Because of these PTGs, the Nilgiri District has become an important 'tribal ethnic zone' in the world of indigenous heritage.

According to the 2001 census, the total population of the Nilgiri District is 7.64 lakhs, out of which the total primitive tribal groups population is 28,373, constituting 4.32 per cent of the total general population. The tribal population in Nilgiri District is not evenly distributed in the six taluks. 32.08 per cent of them are living in Pandalur taluk; 24.10 per cent of them are living in Kotagiri taluk; 14.33 per cent of them are in Gudalur taluk; 13.16 per cent of the tribes are living in Udhagamandalam taluk and remaining 6.96 per cent are living in Coonoor and Kundah taluks.

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On this earth, in India, Todas, a primitive tribal group, are found only in the Nilgiri District of Tamil Nadu state. As per 2001 census, the total population of the Todas is 1560 (757 males and 803 females) and their literacy rate is 76.87 per cent. Todas are known by several names like Todas, Tuduvas, Toras and Todar. The name Toda is supposed to be derived from the word tud, the sacred ththudr tree (Meliosma simplicifolia) of Todas.
The Government of India identified the Toda as one of the six Primitive Tribal Groups (PTGs) of Tamil Nadu. Todas speak a dialect, which is an independent language of the Dravidian family. The Toda village is called a mund, means a herd of cattles and people. Toda mund is usually a collection of five to nine half-barrel shaped huts, each hut with a smaller doorway, measuring only 32 inches by 18 inches. Besides the huts, the mund has another hut with a smaller doorway, called tirireri or dairy temple. In the vicinity of the mund is the buffalo open shelter, called as pen. The uniqueness of their half-barrel shaped huts given speculations to the researchers regarding their origin ranged from Rome to Sumeria. But the Toda adult informants always assured that they had always been on the Nilgiri hills. The traditional garment of a Toda is known as put-kuli, a thick white cotton cloth with red and blue strips which isembroidered by the Toda women, is thrown around the body by men and women like ‘Roman Toga’ (Shawl). Metal ornaments, known as ‘Toda jewellery’ is worn by both men and women. Todas are traditionally lacto-vegetarians.

The Toda community is divided into two endogamous divisions known as teivaliol and tartharol, which are further divided into fourteen exogamous clans. They avoid marital alliance within a clan. In the past, the Toda followed adelphic type of polyandry, a form of plural marriage, but now they strictly follow monogamy. The life cycle rituals are markedly different from other tribes. During the dead body cremation, they sacrifice a buffalo. Rules of inheritance restricted to the sons only. Todas were purely a pastoral people. The care of buffaloes and the duties connected with the dairy formed the sole work of the Toda men. The Toda tribal council is not permanent body but only a group of elderly Toda males selected by common consent for a particular dispute. The Government of Tamil Nadu, recently included a Toda man as a Member in its ‘Tribal Development Board’. The Toda concept of religion is associated with a highly ritualized dairy and buffalo-cult. They have priests to perform rituals. The goddess tokisya is honoured by them as their principal spirit. Todas have unique folklore embedded with variety of songs, proverbs, myths etc., and their traditional dance is an exclusively ceremonial. A few Todas have embraced to Christianity. Todas who are living nearer to towns have joined the main stream development. A few of them are working in the Government and private sectors. Anthropologists consider Todas as internationally popular ethnic community, because of their rare cultural traits like polyandry, social paternity through bow and arrow ceremony, vegetarianism, buffalo sacrifice, priesthood, sacred diaries etc.,

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Nilgiri Tribes

Kotas
In India, Kota tribal group are found only in the Nilgiri District of Tamil Nadu and they inhabited only in seven villages. According to 2001 census, the total population of the Kota is 3122 (1548 males and 1574 females) and their literacy rate is 67.31 per cent. The Kota are known by several names like Koter, Kotharu, Kothewar and Kohatur. Kotas are one of the six Primitive Tribal Groups (PTGs) of Tamil Nadu. The origin of the name 'Kota' is derived from the Dravida root word 'Koi' meaning mountain. The Kota speak a dialect, mixed with the words of Kannada and Tamil words. Kotas are one of the six Primitive Tribal Groups (PTGs) of Tamil Nadu. The origin of the name 'Kota' is derived from the Dravida root word 'Koi', meaning mountain.

The Kota village is called a KOKKAL, represent a linear type, fourty to sixty houses, with three or four streets, called as keris. Kota traditional garment is known as 'varad'; a white bed-spread cloth, is thrown around the body by men and women. Kodk, traditional ear-ring ornament are used both by men and women. They are non-vegetarians.

The Kota have no broad sub-divisions but the most striking feature is their keri system. Keri, a street acts as an exogamous unit and its decent is unilineal in the male line, which regulates the marriage pattern. Monogamy is the most common form of marriage. The life cycle rituals are marked with purity and pollution. They follow the male ultimogeniture mode of inheritance. The Kotas are the only artisan community on the hills of the Nilgiris. As Rev. Metz (1864) aptly remarked that, “Kotas in the olden days were the only one of all the hill tribes who practiced the industrial arts and they were therefore essential almost to the very existence of the other tribes and castes of the Nilgiris.” Kotas have been smiths in gold and silver, they are carpenters, blacksmiths, potters and musicians. The Kota women are experts in pottery work. The Kota were living in symbiosis with other communities, viz., the Todas, the Kurumbas and the Badagas. Later in the process of hill area development, Kotas gradually adapted horticulture and vegetables cultivation. The Kota tribal council, called as 'Koot', maintains customary norms in the community. The Kota follow animism and worship Kambatrayan and Kambatiswari in the names of Ayyanor and Ammanor, in temples located in a separate sacred complex adjacent to a Kota settlement. Kotas have many tales to tell to their younger generation. Kota usually dance to the tunes of their music during their festivals, and also while celebrating life cycle rituals. The types of their dances are kalcoose aat, thiriganaat, pippaalaat and koinaat. The names of their musical instruments are Kob, Kolu, Pur and Thobok. Because of formal education and their positive perception on mainstream development, most of the Kotas are joined successful economic development path. At present, the Kota community have proudly represent one medical officer (MBBS degree holder), five Engineers, twenty one graduates, besides one Kota youth studying in other country.

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Nilgiri Tribes

Kurumbas
The Kurumbas of Nilgiri District are entirely different from other names like Kuruman, Kurumba, Kuruba etc. Because of ethnic differences between these names, to avoid confusion, the Government of India declared that, those Kurumbas who are living only in Nilgiri District are categorized as a Scheduled Tribe and included them in the list of Primitive Tribal Groups (PTGs). As per 2001 census, the total population of the Kurumbas is 5498 (2707 males and 2791 females) and their literacy rate is 49.03 percent. A.A.D Luiz (1962) stated that, "it is possible that their name originated from the Tamil word, ‘kurumbo’ (mischief), because in their savage state they were very arrogant and mischievous." This statement is not accepted by the youth of the Kurumbas.

In his study, Jakka parthasarathy (2003) identified five Kurumbas in the Nilgiri District on the basis of region of residence, language and variety of cultural traits. These groups are named as Alu (or) palu Kurumbas, Betta Kurumbas, Jenu or Teen Kurumbas, Mullu Kurumbas and Urali Kurumbas. Alu Kurumbas are found in the taluks of Coonoor and Kotagiri; Betta Kurumbas and Jenu Kurumbas are inhabiting in Mudumalai sanctuary; Mullu Kurumbas are found in Pandalur taluk whereas Urali Kurumbas are distributed in the taluks of Gudalur and Pandalur. The Kurumbas settlement is called as mottam, represents cluster of many huts inside the forest. They are non-vegetarians.

The Kurumbas are divided into two endogenous divisions, which are further divided into many clans. They practice cross cousin marriage. Their life cycle rituals are simple and they follow rigid pollution. They follow the custom of burial with elaborate funeral rites which differ according to sex, age and rank. They follow the patrilineal rule of succession.

The Kurumbas were hunters, forest food gatherers, shifting cultivators, effective sorcerers by which they heal the diseases. Now the Kurumbas adapted labour work on the forms of coffee, tea and vegetable. A few Kurumbas also become experts in basket wearing. They recognize a community headman called ‘maniyanagar’ who presides the Kurumba tribal council. The Kurumbas were animists and totemists, now believe Hindu religion and worship ‘Kumba devaru’ and ‘Karupade thayi’. Kurumbas have oral tradition that flows through songs, tales and rhymes. Their dances are two types; gantes attam and yenna attam and their musical instruments are referred by them as kolu, tambate, are, bugiru etc., Kurumbas women are body tattooers. One Anthropologist lamented that, “it is certainly ironic that while the Kurumbas were the first Nilgiri community to become known to scholars, they were the last to be studied at all closely.”

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Nilgiri Tribes

Irulas
Irula or Irulas, a Scheduled Tribe, are one of the major tribes of Tamil Nadu and are distributed in twelve districts which includes the Nilgiris. The Irula total population in Tamil Nadu, according to 2001 census, is 155606 (77942 males and 77664 females) and their literacy rate is 34.30 percent. In Tamil nadu, the Irula are known as several names like Irular, Iruligaru, Iruliga, Iruvan, Villiar, Kadu Poojaris etc., but the Irula people who are dwelling in Nilgiris district prefer to call themselves as ‘Irulas’. The name Irula is supposed to be derived from the Tamil word ‘Irul’, meaning darkness, which may refer to their black skin complexion. The Government of India, identified the Irula as one of the six primitive tribal groups of Tamil Nadu.

In Nilgiri District, Irulas are spread over in four taluks, Kundah, Kotagiri, Coonoor and Udhagamandalam and their total population in Nilgiris District as per survey (Jakka Parthasarathy 2003) was 8714, total families 1913 and they are inhabiting in 67 villages. They speak irula, a dialect which is a south Dravidan language of the Tamil – Malayalam sub group. Irula settlement is called as aral, represent many houses built contiguous to each other. Typical man wears a short piece of cloth around the waist and a towel on his shoulder, woman wears thundu, (a piece of cloth) around the waist in combination with the modern blouse. They are non-vegetarians.

The Irulas in Nilgiri District have three social divisions known as Mudumars (southern Irulas of Kotagiri base), Kasabas (northern irulas of Masinagudi base) and Urali Irulas of Attapady (Karala) base. Irulas are further divided into seven exogamous groups called kulams, which regulate their marital alliances. They practice cross-cousin marriages. Monogamy is the common form of marriage. Child marriages are common. They are rigid regarding taboos connected with pre-delivery, post-delivery, tonsure ceremony, puberty and death. They follow the male equigeniture mode of inheritance. Irulas were hunters and gatherers. Shortt (1868: 62) wrote that, “Irulas collected wild fruits, herbs and roots to appease hunger along with beeswax, drugs, dyes, gum, honey and medicinal herbs. The gathered products were exchanged with lowlanders for cloth or food”. Now most of the Irulas are wage labourers working in Tea Estates. The Irula have headman called ‘maniyakara’, who presides over their tribal council. The Irula are partly Hinduized, but have their own autochthonous- indigenous religious system. An Irula priest performs rituals at famous Rangaswamy temple of Rangan peak in Nilgiri hills.

As mentioned elsewhere (Jakka Parthasarathy 2003) Irulas are suffering because of much interference of non-tribals into their aesthetic, social and cultural unchanged preserves. According to some anthropologists, the Irula of the Nilgiris afford a case for the study of modes of adaptation, acculturation and modernization.

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The Paniyan or Paniyas are found in southern part of India in the states of Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu. In Tamil Nadu, the Paniyan tribal people, identified as a Scheduled Tribe and also as one of the six primitive tribal groups, are found only in the Nilgiri District, in the taluks of Gudalur and Pandalur. According to 2001 census, the total population of the Paniyans in Nilgiri District is 9121 (4532 males and 4589 females) and their literacy rate is 30.81 per cent. The term ‘Paniyan’, literally means a ‘worker’ is the modified form of the Malayalam word Panikkar (Labourer). The Paniyan people resemble the African tribes in their curly hair and thick lips. There are numerous speculations regarding the origin of the Paniyans. A.A.D. Luiz (1962: 218-219) mentioned that, “some are of the opinion that they are an African tribe that came into India after a shipwreck on the west coast. Their cephalic and nasal indicate a resemblance to the long armed African Negroes. At one time in the past they were the principle stock-in-trade on the west coast, and it is possible that they were imported from Africa and sold in Malabar”.

The Paniyan speak ‘Paniya bashe’, mixed with Malayalam and Tamil words. The Paniyan settlement is called as Paddi, represent a few huts built in rows in one corner of the agricultural farm. The Paniyan are black in colour, being short, strong built and curly haired. Men wear a mundu (a piece of long cloth) around their waist and long towel around their body, women tie a white cloth wound round twice over the abdomen like a belt. The women wear base metal bangles and bracelets in their wrists and they embed leaves and seeds into the dilated ear lobes. They are non-vegetarians.

Paniyan society is divided socially into different lineages known as illams, which is traced in the maternal line. Monogamy is the most common form of marriage. Child marriages were common but changed to adult marriages. They observe strict taboos and rituals during child birth, naming ceremony, puberty, marriage and death. They bury the dead and celebrate the funeral rites elaborately with the help of their priest, attali. Rules of inheritance is restricted to sister’s children. Their chief occupation is agricultural labour. They subjected to a subtle form of bonded labour by the local non-tribal land lords. The Nilgiri Administration released a few Paniyan bonded labourers and rehabilitated them in Government run farms. The Paniyan tribal council, called Kottani is a permanent body with a group of elderly Paniyans called ‘muppanmars’. They follow the religious cult of animism and worship goddess ‘Kattu Bhagavathy’. A few Paniyans embraced to Christianity. The Paniyans in Nilgiri District are becoming the true survivors of the disappeared Malabar civilization. They are still searching the old meanings of the Malabar Culture and primitive ethos.

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