

Volume 21 - Issue 05,  
February 28 - March  
12, 2004

India's National Magazine  
from the publishers of THE  
HINDU

**Frontline**

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## COMMUNITIES

### THE TRUTH ABOUT THE TODAS

ANTHONY R. WALKER

**On the origins, customs and changing lifestyle of the tribal  
community in the Nilgiris.**

PAULINE H. WALKER



**A 1974 photograph of a Toda hamlet in the Nilgiris, Tamil Nadu.**

SINCE the early 19th century, a great deal of misinformation has been generated about the origins and socio-economic institutions of the Toda people of the Nilgiris in Tamil Nadu. But, for over a century now, following the arrival in the Nilgiris in 1901 of Cambridge University scholar W.H.R. Rivers, much painstaking anthropological and linguistic research has been accomplished. This has resulted, *inter alia*, in such books as Rivers' *The Todas* (1906), M.B. Emeneau's *Toda Songs* (1971), *Ritual Structure and Language Structure of the Todas* (1974) and *Toda Grammar and Texts* (1984), and this writer's *The Toda of South India: A New Look* (1986) and *Between Tradition and Modernity and Other Essays on the Toda of South India* (1998).

Despite this solid body of research, it seems that some writers have no qualms about propagating arrant nonsense in the name of information. As it is said, "a good story travels a thousand miles while the truth decides which pair of socks to wear". Unfortunately a "good story" on the Internet travels even faster, and spreads more widely than ever before.

A particularly galling assemblage of ancient errors and modern absurdities about the Toda people is the anonymously written article "The Todas: Pagan Rituals, Primitive Rites", posted on indiaprofile.com, apparently a site designed to promote tourism and disseminate information about India's people and their cultures.

### Toda origins and physical characteristics

ANTHONY R. WALKER



**Toda homes today, vivid evidence of the changes that have occurred in the tribal community over the past four decades.**

Setting a pattern of inaccuracy and blatant misinformation that characterises almost all that follows, the article begins thus: "*Todas, an ancient people living in the Nilgiris, are according to anthropologists an offshoot of the 'Lost Tribe' of Israel, who "in dress and stature strongly resemble characters from the Old Testament"*.

This old chestnut dates back to the 1840s. It was first proposed by John Ouchterlony in his "Geographical and Statistical Memoir of a Survey of the Neilgherry Mountains" (*Madras Journal of Literature and Science* of 1847). It lacked (as it still does) a historical, ethnological, genetic, or linguistic basis; it is simply one long-ago visitor's personal reaction to the appearance of a few Toda men he happened upon while surveying in the Nilgiris.

We may never discover the precise origin of the Todas, but what we do know places them in South India, not ancient Israel.

The Toda language belongs to the Dravidian family; it separated from Tamil-Malayalam circa 3rd century B.C. Todas' linguistic affiliations are with South India and even their much-remarked physical characteristics - tall, with fairish skins, aquiline noses and so on - are neither true of all Todas nor absent in the wider South Indian community.

### Settlement patterns and housing

ANTHONY R. WALKER



**Planting tea saplings. Agriculture is gaining ground rapidly among the Todas.**

The purveyor of misinformation on the Net asserts that "*the Todas live in small groups in the forests around Ootacamund*", their "*beehive shaped huts are made of reed and bamboo woven together*" and "*at present there are only a few munds [the local word for Toda hamlet] left, each one consisting of five families*", which are "*self-sufficient...*"

Most of this is patently false.

The Todas were never, so far as we can determine, forest-dwellers. Traditionally pastoralists herding their buffaloes over the Nilgiri grasslands, they certainly made extensive use of the *sholas* (Nilgiri copses) as sources of building materials, shady refuges for their buffaloes, and the locale for ritual activities; but their *munds*, although near, were not inside them.

Today traditional Toda homes have largely disappeared. Only three or four of more than 50 Toda hamlets can still boast one. Modern dwellings are built of brick and cement, with tiled roofs; some would not be out of place in suburban Chennai or Bangalore.

In 2000 there were 56 occupied Toda *munds*, considerably more than "a few", and in that year this writer counted from as few as one to as many as 19 households per *mund*. Moreover, since they belong to specified exogamous patrilineages, in turn constituted into two ritually conjoined sub-castes, these settlements are not (and never have been) self-sufficient.

### Buffalo pastoralism

ANTHONY R. WALKER



**Water-buffaloes of the Todas graze near a dairy-temple.**

*"The prosperity of each mund is judged by the herds of wild buffaloes owned by it. These ferocious but magnificent animals roam the forests living on wild vegetation and when it is time to milk them, the Toda in charge makes a rather weird call and immediately the wild herd returns to the mund. After the milking is over, the herd adjourns to the wilds again."*

The special breed of water buffalo herded by the Todas is indeed a magnificent animal, and can be ferocious - at times even life-threatening - if disturbed by humans with whom it is unfamiliar. But these are not "wild buffaloes"; in fact they are quite docile *with their masters*, and even a small Toda boy may freely mingle with them.

Able to withstand the cool Nilgiri climate without man-made shelters, these buffaloes thrive on the coarse grasses of the high plateau. They do not "*roam the forests living on wild vegetation*", and being penned at night, they certainly do not "*adjourn to the wilds again*"!

It was generally (although not invariably) true - some 40 years ago - that a hamlet's prosperity could be judged by the size of its buffalo herd. It is now altogether another story. Scarcely 10 per cent of Toda households own sufficient buffaloes for economic viability and, for the most part, buffalo husbandry has been sidelined by agriculture.

### **Social organisation and gender relations**

ANTHONY R. WALKER

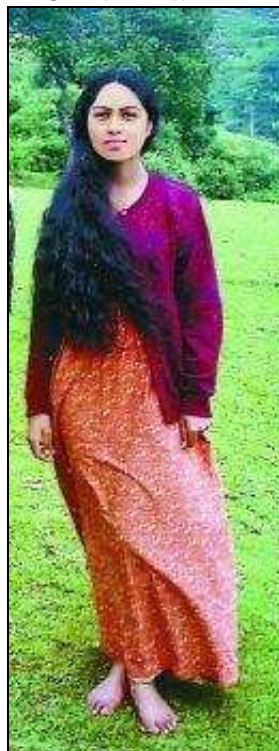


**The Todas today are comfortable in traditional clothes.**

It is undoubtedly fair to describe Toda society as "*patriarchal*". But to write of post-pastoral Toda society in the 21st century as one in which "*Toda women play a subsidiary role to the Toda buffalo*" is patently absurd. Toda women, like women all over India, are still far from achieving socio-political and ritual parity with their menfolk. But much change is in the air. Moreover, this society seems always to have permitted greater liberty to its womenfolk than is the Indian norm.

### Female infanticide

PAULINE R. WALKER



**In modern clothes.**

It is true that the Todas once practised female infanticide. However, even 130 years ago, the Todas resolutely denied early claims - blindly repeated by the Web-author - that this was accomplished by having the infant trampled to death by buffaloes.

Infanticide was criminalised in the early 19th century and had more or less vanished among the Todas by the end of that century - more than a hundred years ago.

### Polyandry and paternity

ANTHONY R. WALKER



ANTHONY R. WALKER



### **A modern Toda home would not be out of place in any Indian City.**

Again, it is true that the Todas once practised the relatively rare, although widespread (in Asia, Africa and Oceania), marriage custom whereby a woman has a plurality of husbands. But it is quite untrue to write (in the present tense no less): "*Women in each mund are common wives to all the men in the mund.*" According to traditional Toda practice, a woman in a polyandrous union was the shared spouse of a set of brothers, with whom she lived in a common home. But today, as with female infanticide, polyandry no longer exists among the Todas. To suggest otherwise is misleading.

It is deceptive also to write that "*all the women in the mund are `earth-mother` [to a child born there] and all the men are `earth-father`". Even more so to write that "*children from different mothers are not considered related and can cohabit on reaching puberty*". Children of different mothers but the same social father are brothers and sisters, and intercourse between them would be "vile incest".*

In his (or her) quaint language, the Web author writes: "*The birth of a child is in no way connected with togetherness.*" I trust this is not a plea to recognise virgin birth among the Todas, although it might just be, given that the text continues, the "*Moon god is the benefactor and a child is produced when the god so decrees*". I presume the writer is trying to explain that biological paternity is (traditionally, at least) unimportant among the Todas. This is correct. How could it have been otherwise in the days when Todas practised fraternal polyandry?

"Social" paternity, on the other hand, was (and remains) of crucial importance, for without it an individual has no social, economic or religious status in Toda society. Such paternity is bestowed, as the Web-author correctly observes, through ritual: the offering by a male (man or boy) of a symbolic bow-and-arrow to the pregnant woman, representing

his acceptance of the fruit of her womb.

But this is not a Toda marriage ceremony, as is suggested. Marriage occurs in infancy, because of ritual requirements (no Toda should die unwed, for example). And it is entirely wrong that "*a boy selects a girl and lives with her in her parents' home*". On the contrary, the Toda people have always followed the common Indian custom of living with or near the husband's family, not the wife's.

### Religion and ritual life

*"For the Todas a buffalo is sacred, as is a tree with a forked branch [how many trees do not have forked branches?] and the Moon god, not goddess, is the benefactor", "their temples are secret" and "the horns of different animals are kept as deities".*

These statements are parodies of the complex Toda religious culture.

Central to Toda religion are sacred places associated with the community's dairy-temples, their related buffalo herds, appurtenances and priesthood. These are not simply places where gods reside, but are themselves divine, the "gods of the places", the Todas say. Entry into a Toda dairy is prohibited to all but Toda males of appropriate ritual status. But the dairy-temples are not "secret"; many are located within the *munds* themselves.

Loosely, it is right to say that buffaloes (specifically she-buffaloes) are sacred animals for the Todas. (Should that concept be deemed strange in the land that has for so long championed the sanctity of its other bovine, the cow?) But there is a basic dichotomy between those Toda buffaloes associated with dairy temples and those that are principally for domestic use.

Toda dairies, buffaloes and dairymen are graded within a complex hierarchy according to relative sanctity, with different rules and rituals pertaining to each grade. The higher the grade of a dairy, the greater the sanctity of its buffalo herds and the dairyman-priest who operates it. And the more sacred a dairy, the more elaborate are the rituals that accompany the milking, churning and other daily activities of the dairyman-priest, and the greater must be the condition of ritual purity in which he keeps the dairy, its appurtenances and himself. The key concepts underlying the entire dairy complex are also those that inform much of Indic religious culture.

Apart from the "gods of the places", the Todas recognise another category of divine entities, the "gods of the mountains", because most of them are associated with one or another Nilgiri peak. Unlike the "gods of the places", these are anthropomorphic deities, some of whom, the Todas say, once lived on earth as humans, or, better, as super-humans.

We are told that the Todas honour a male "Moon god". Certainly the sun and the moon are revered, but neither is accorded the status of a "god", presumably because the Todas do not associate these celestial bodies with the "sacred places" or with the mountain peaks. Moreover, the Todas are generally quite specific in ascribing female gender to the moon. *Pish*

*tienon moxm, tigel tozmoxmu idti* [the sun is a male and the moon is a female]," they say.

Probably the Web-author's reference to a sacred tree "with a forked branch" refers to the hill mango, its bark being used in several ritual contexts as a purificatory agent; it is not "worshipped".

## Funerals

PAULINE R. WALKER



**Before a bus ride to attend a funeral - not "foot-slogging", as claimed on the website.**

Toda funerary customs, it is alleged, are "for a Toda chief... blood-curdling". Since there are no Toda "chiefs" - only influential men and women - this is already a non-starter.

*"The elaborate ceremony is held at daybreak and close to a stream, nearly always 14 miles away from the settlement, of which three to four miles are covered by foot-slogging... . As tradition demands Kotah [sic] blowing numerous trumpet-like horns... precede the procession... considering it an honour to make music on the death of a Toda chief and accept no payment."*

Almost every Toda's wish is to die at home amidst loved ones. Thus the first funerary rituals begin right inside the home of the deceased; and are followed by others within the hamlet, before the body is carried to the funeral place.

Each patriclan has at least one funeral place for males and another for females, certainly not all 14 miles away. How much foot-slogging may be involved these days depends entirely on the proximity of a bus stop or motorable track (for those who own or can hire a vehicle).

In the past, a principal male funeral place would have had a special funerary temple, and because of this, there had to be a nearby stream. But since such temples are no longer operated (and there were none in female funeral places anyway), there is no specific requirement that the rites take place, let alone begin, near a stream.

Kota musicians have not played music at Toda funerals for almost 60 years. The Kotas mounted a mobility campaign in the 1930s and 1940s to

challenge the general perception of their lowly status, and one of the first things the reformers demanded was that their fellow caste men abstain from playing music at other communities' funerals. Today the musicians at a Toda funeral are professionals, hired for the purpose and paid in cash.

*"The body of the chief lying on a decorated cot is carried by pallbearers immediately behind the musicians. Following him are the mund wives, each reclining on a blanket or sheet tied to parallel poles and carried by males... . The wives sit in squares of four and when the sun is high in the sky, at a given signal, they start wailing and weeping... "*

The procession from hamlet to funeral place is adequately described - that is, if we substitute "deceased" for "chief" and "deceased's wife (if elderly or infirm)" for "*mund wives*". But the description of mourning is wrong. The traditional touching of foreheads is not unique to "*mund wives*" (itself a misrepresentation), but is practised by both males and females. The mourners form pairs, not foursomes, do not seat themselves in squares, nor do all begin to weep "at a given signal", nor, necessarily, "when the sun is high in the sky".

The description of the capture and sacrifice of buffaloes is also far from accurate.

From the early 1960s, if not earlier, it has been customary not to sacrifice more than a couple of animals: one temple and one domestic buffalo for a male, and two domestic ones for an aged and relatively important female, otherwise just one; for a child, only a calf was sacrificed. Moreover, since the mid-to-late 1970s, there has been much opposition by younger, reform-minded Todas to the sacrifice of any buffaloes at all. Many Toda funerals now omit the ancient custom entirely.

*"A number of young, powerful, athletic young men dressed only in loincloths and armed with a hammer-like weapon, jump amidst the angry buffaloes to kill them with blows of considerable force between the horns. When the buffaloes charge, the young men nimbly throw themselves between the horns of the animals, and, in an effort to dislodge the riders, the buffaloes drive their horns into the turf. This is when the young men strike the death blow... . Any man in the gathering within reach, can administer the death blow." And, further on, we read: "The young man who kills the maximum number of buffaloes during the cremation ceremony is presented with a key to all the munds and the Moon god continues to be the benefactor."*

Most of this description is either hopelessly confused or just plain wrong.

The men who strive to catch the sacrificial buffaloes do not carry any "hammer-like weapon" with which to strike the animals, but use their bare hands to seize the horns (usually two men to each horn), forcing down the animal's head and thereby gaining control of it. (There are no "riders" to be "dislodged".) Another man beats the animal on its flank and rear quarters with a cattle stick. In this manner, admittedly far from pretty, the captured buffaloes are compelled forward to the place of sacrifice.

If a temple buffalo is to be sacrificed, it is dragged up to a special stone or wooden post and tethered with a particular kind of *shola* creeper. In some

circumstances a sacred cattle bell, or bell-like object, is hung around the animal's neck. A dairyman-priest of ritual rank equivalent to the sacrificial buffalo dispatches the animal with the blunt end of an axe, endeavouring to end its mortal life with a single blow directed to the skull between the horns. He should not draw blood since the object of the sacrifice is to release the spirit of an unblemished buffalo, so that it may join the deceased Toda in the afterworld.

For an ordinary domestic buffalo, no ritual tethering is dictated, but an ordinary non-sacred bell may be hung around its neck. The animal is similarly dispatched, but by a layman rather than by a dairyman-priest.

There is no question of a young man being rewarded for killing the most buffaloes. As for a "key to all the *munds*", does the Web-writer envisage walled Toda settlements with a locked gateway? And since the Todas do not recognise a "Moon god", we can forget that one too.

The Todas used to observe two funeral ceremonies: the first during which the corpse was cremated and the second, up to a year or more later, when certain bodily remains of the deceased were burned. The last second funeral occurred in 1966. To write in the present tense of preserving relics following the cremation is 40 years behind the times.

That, perhaps, is not so bad as the flight of fancy that has the Web-author writing that after the cremation is over, *"it is now time for rejoicing. Women from other munds drag the mourning women into the stream nearby. Their clothes are torn off them [and] they are bathed. Their hair is washed and dressed with butter into cork-screw ringlets. It is, however, customary and polite to resist the bath and thus indicate a desire to go on mourning"*.

One can only stress that all this is pure imagination (an attempt, perhaps, to justify the "pagan" and "primitive" designations of the article's title?).

## Demographics

PAULINE R. WALKER



**A hired ban, not Kotas, performs outside the far-from-traditional home of a deceased Toda.**

This parody of Toda culture concludes, as it began, with a blatant

falsehood. *"The Todas today are fast disappearing . . . due largely to intermarriage and the brutal killing . . . [of] female infants."*

So far as we know, the Toda community has always been a small one, kept so in the past by the combined institutions of polyandry and infanticide. It is also true that the community experienced an alarming demographic decline during the first half of the 20th century. But the reasons were not those given by our Web-person, since female infanticide had mostly ceased and outmarriage, except among Christian converts, was (and still is) rare.

It was rather the prevalence of venereal infections that seriously compromised female fertility, and the problem was tackled with penicillin between the mid-1950s and early 1960s. Today's Toda community, well over a thousand strong, is almost twice as numerous as it was when this writer began his research among them in the early 1960s.

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*He first came to India in 1959, working as a volunteer teacher at Mayo College in Ajmer for half a year before attending Osmania University in Hyderabad as an undergraduate student under a Commonwealth Universities scholarship programme. He conducted his first fieldwork among the Todas during 1962-63 under the auspices of the Delhi School of Economics and, since then, has returned to them 14 times, most recently in 2000.*

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