

## MUSEUMS AND TRIBAL AESTHETIC VALUES: SOME REFLECTIONS FROM NILGIRI HILLS, TAMIL NADU

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***Abstract:** Museum is defined as a depository for collecting and displaying objects having scientific or historical or artistic value. Museums are often impressive example of the architecture of their day. There are large numbers of cognitions which depicts this institution may be perceived as a means through which anthropological knowledge may be disseminated to a wider public. It may be further mentioned that art is also understood as the products of human creativity. Traditionally, many anthropologists have focused on the study of the art of preliterate societies and also of artistic traditions belonging to folk culture or ethnic minorities within a dominant literate culture. The notion of the aesthetic, which defines the concepts of beauty and evocativeness, is of course a culture bond. In fact, aesthetic experience involves both emotion and cognition. Keeping this backdrop within purview, this paper seeks to understand the tribal aesthetic values in the movement of tribal museums with reference to six particularly vulnerable tribal groups inhabiting in Nilgiri hills of Nilgiri District of Tamil Nadu state.*

### INTRODUCTION

Museum is defined as a depository for collecting and displaying objects having scientific or historical or artistic value. Museums are often impressive example of the architecture of their day. As Charlotte Seymour-Smith (1986; 203) has aptly remarked that "Museums cover an increasingly wide range of areas of human culture and scientific enquiry, from science and natural history to archeology, ethnology and diverse aspects of local history. More narrowly, museums devoted to archeology to ethnology or anthropology are of special interest both to the student and scholar in anthropology and as a means through which anthropological knowledge may be disseminated to a wider public". By the way as an educational tool for the dissemination of material artifacts, the traditional museum has been much utilized by social scientists both for its bias towards the display of objects of traditional material culture divorced from their socio cultural contest and its failure to take into account the modern conditions under which ethnographically studied people live. C.S Smith further explained with the above observation that "Modern museums attempt to overcome these limitations both by extending their

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educational activities to include talks, performances, ethnographic film and so on and by attempting to integrate into their displays information about the total social and cultural context within which material objects occur”.

The tribe the Roman word *tribua* means a political unit and was used to refer to social groups defined by the territory they occupied. Morgan (1877) defined the tribe as a group which possessed social institutions. Main (1861) characterized it as a group in which legal relations were based on the principle of status rather than that of contract. In this sense of a pre-political or pre-contract society the term passed into general usage as a synonym for a primitive social group. In India, the constitution of India article 342 categorized tribal groups as scheduled tribes on the basis of primitive traits, a distinctive culture, and geographical isolation and socio economic backwardness. These tribal communities live in various ecological and geo climatic conditions ranging from forests, hills, plains and inaccessible areas, in India there are over 600 scheduled tribes spread over different states and union territories. Among them 75 scheduled tribes are identified as particularly vulnerable tribal groups (PVTGS) on the basis of a) a pre-agriculture level of technology b) a stagnant or declining population c) extremely low literacy d) a subsistence level of economy.

Art is the creation of beautiful as significant thing. Art is also understood as the products of human creativity. Art is common sense is a superior skill that you can learn by study and practice and observation. Anthropologists have focused on the study of the art of preliterate societies and also of artistic traditions belonging to Folk culture or ethnic minorities within a dominant literate culture. More attention has been paid to plastic, clay and graphic arts. Some anthropologists have used artistic data to address questions of cross-cultural variation or universals. “Anthropological studies of the symbolism of art have followed a variety of approaches ranging from psychological or psycho analytic to structuralist perspectives” (Charlotte Seymour – Smith: 1986: 16). The notion of the aesthetic which defines the concepts of beauty and evocativeness, is of course a culture bond. Aesthetic experience involves both emotion and cognition. Beryl Lie off Benderly (1977: 241) has aptly narrated that, “every culture recognizes aesthetic standards or a concept of beauty. This concept imposes limits on the produces who would have his on her work considered admirable and guides other members of the culture in evaluating the work. He further clarified that (1977: 196). “In every cosmology ther is an evaluation of the elements composing the universe, that is, a set of beliefs and feelings regarding what is good and what is bad, what is desirable and what is undesirable. These beliefs known as values help more behavior and thought.”

This paper seeks to understand the tribal aesthetic values in the movement of tribal museums with reference to six particularly vulnerable tribal groups inhabiting in Nilgiri hills of Nilgiri District of Tamil Nadu state.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The present paper is based on the data collected from six particularly vulnerable tribal groups inhabiting in the Nilgiri District of Tamil Nadu. They are Todas, Kotas, Kurumbas, Irulas, Paniyans and Kattunayakans. Anthropological methodology tools like participant observation, genealogy, case study, group discussion, cross cultured study etc., are used while collecting the data. Secondary data is collected by referring indigenous literature and present way of life of the tribes. Tribal museum movement is traced by examining the objectives of the museums, which are selected on the basis of preservation of specific tribal artifacts. Tribal aesthetic values are observed through reflections and thoughts of the tribal informants selected from six tribal groups. The following tribal museums four in number three are organized by Non-Government Organizations and one by Government of Tamil Nadu Department of Adi Dhruvidas and Tribe welfare.

1. Tribal Museum, Kota Hall, Nilgiri Adiwasi Welfare Association, Kotagiri, Nilgiri District.
2. Tribal Museum, Tribal Research Centre, Government of Tamil Nadu, M palada, Ooty, Nilgiri District.
3. Tribal Museum, late Mrs Pilgin Widaman House, Ooty
4. Tribal Museum CTRD Trust, Elamanna (V) Mangorange, Pandalur Taluk, Nilgiri District

The main theme of the paper is development of the tribal museums by inputting tribal aesthetic values so that tribal museum movement be traced towards culture continuity and change of values that affect the concepts of the museums and tribal aesthetic values.

### **THE AREA OF STUDY**

In Tamil Nadu, state, Nilgiri District or Nilgiri hill is selected for the present study. In Tamil Nadu state total scheduled tribes, totally 36 groups constitute 1.04 percent of the total population. In Nilgiri district, the total tribal populations (Six tribal groups) constitute 4.32 percent of the total general population. Nilgiri district is a part of the Western Ghats with a hilly area of 259 sq kms with an average elevation of about 7000ft. The district is divided into four bio-physical zones based on the topography and climate. These

independent ecological zones are the Nilgiri plateau. The Burliar Coimbatore plains the Sigur plateau and the Wynaad plateau.

In Nilgiri district, six scheduled tribes are found they are Todas, Kotas, Kurumbas, Irulas, Paniyans and Kattanayakans. The spatial distributions of those tribes are on the basis of the altitude of the Nilgiri hills. Todas and Kotas are found in the Nilgiri plateau and slopes. Irulas and Kurumbas are found more in Burliar-Coimbatore plains, paniyans and kattnnayakans are found in the wynaad plateau. These scheduled tribes are also categorized as particularly vulnerable tribal groups (PVTGS). These scheduled tribes along with the Badaga community (a backward class) are considered as indigenous groups while other caste groups are previously considered as migrant groups.

### TRIBAL AESTHETIC VALUES

**Todas** : Toda or Thodar a tribal community are found only in upper plateau of the Nilgiri hills inhabiting in 69 mundas (villages). They are vegetarians, live in half barrel shaped huts and were pastoral community now settled but still depending buffalo economy. Their aesthetic values are around their rituals of bow and arrow ceremony, past memories of polyandry, belief in spirits in and around shola forests, sacrifice of a buffalo before cremating the human dead body of their community vegetarianism by consuming rice boiled in a milk, bad memories of female girl infanticide, threads and colors used while doing embroidery of toda shawls by their women, toda sacred places impact of Hindu main streams ritual like worship of Shiva, Muruga and Ayyapa swamy besides Ganesha.

**Kotas** : Kota or Kohtar a tribal group are living only in seven villages in Nilgiri hills mostly on upper and middle plateau. They are artisans work on wood, iron, clay expert in industrial arts. Their aesthetic values are around father god Ayyanor referred by them as Kambataraya and mother goddess Ammanor, referred by them as Kambateeswar, past memories of eating the buffalo flesh, sacrificed by the todas during their funerals traditional musicians and dancers, making fire by using wooden stick and cotton piece, priest hood, salt ceremony, typical shawl and adoption of main stream goddess Mariyamma into their religious fold.

**Kurumbas** : Kurumbas, in Tamil Nadu are categorized as a scheduled tribe only in Nilgiri district. They are divided into different social groups like Alu Kurumbas, Jenu Kurumbas, Betta Kurumbas, Mullu Kurumbas and Urali Kurumbas. They spread throughout Nilgiri district. The Kurumba aesthetic values are around forest spirits, witchcraft and sorcery hard worshipping pattern of ancestral worship, flute music and song based on life style rituals

role of healers by using plant and animal parts as tribal medicine, humour content of their folklore etc.,

*Irulas* : Irulas a tribe found at the middle range and foot hills of the Nilgiri hills are age old tribe having much relation with the Irulas of Attapadi (Kerala region) area. The Irulas aesthetic values include priesthood in Hindu temples, music and dance suffering like low wages of tea estates that dialect of secret language and also rituals related to hunting and forest food gathering their team cooperation in extracting rock honey are knowledge of honey bees and their adaptive vaishnavism etc.,

*Paniyans* : paniyans who claimed that their origin is Africa, are inhabiting on the foot hills of the Nilgiri district in the taluks of Gudalur and Pandalur. They are also found adjacent district of Wayanaad of Kerala state. Since many years they suffered as slaves, boulder laborers and also identified as the most backward tribal group in Tamil Nadu. The paniyan aesthetic values involve around their role of their priest, "athali" in worshipping their spirits and his speculation for their future activities of life, women devil dance to avoid evil effects of spirits and new diseases, teasing and abusing their land lords who harass them, by their folklore of stories and songs and the effects of nearby markets, towns and Malayalam and Tamil cinemas, forest based and paddy growing economy.

*Kattanayakans*: Kattanayakans are found in Nilgiri district only at the borders of Nilgiri district and Gundalpet taluk of Chamaraja Nagar district of Karnataka, particularly in the taluks of Pandalur and Gudalur. They speak among themselves Kannada dialect and are living as forest laborers, agricultural laborers and also a few of them growing paddy in their small sized agricultural lands. They are experts in catching and teaming wild elephants. The kattanayakans aesthetic values are significantly around their cordial relationship with forest and wild animals magic, witchcraft and sorcery, sustainable development inside the forest with the help of government forest department, dominant ethnic relationship with neighboring tribal groups like Jenu Kurumbas, Paniyans and also with Malayalam speaking Mullu Kurumbas and aesthetically made musical instruments the sound which lures their ancestor, and wild life. Through the kattanayakans entered the main stream by accepting modern development, but still they are not willing to leave their forest habitat.

#### **TRIBAL MUSEUM MOVEMENT IN NILGIRI DISTRICT**

The value of tribal artifacts and their preservation thought was first evolved among the rich migrants and tourist to the Nilgiri hills only after reading the

monumental anthropological research book (Two volumes) written by W.H.R. Rivers and published 115 years back. Those days during British period. The upper plateau of the Nilgiri hills became popular at international level because of the presence of the Toda tribal group, who were polyandrous, unique culture appearance in practice and also the mystery of their origin. Thus Toda material culture has become the origin of the museum movement in Nilgiri hills. The symbiotic relationship between Todas, Kotas, Badagas and Kurumas further aggregates the museum movement and small tribal museums were started appearing inside a few rich class houses. But after independence to the country, during 1950s and 1960s, the value of the marketing the tribal artifacts was raised up and most of the Toda jewelry artifacts and industrial art implements of the Kota tribe started to disappear because most of the keepers of these artifacts started selling them at higher cost to the tourist buyers. The museum movement was gradually lipped down and availability of artifacts had become rare items. First time after passing this period Dr. S. Narasimhan a medical doctor who decided to serve the Irulas and Kurumbas at Kotagiri taluk started "the Nilgiris Adivasi Welfare Association (NAWA) in 1958 with one of the objectives of the association was preserving and promoting tribal arts and crafts; These in 1958 tribal museum movement was again started with the growth of NAWA at Kotagiri town. But gradually due to domination of Toda members gradually their museum has become Toda shawl manufacturing embroidery (Shawl and its allied items) centre without exhibiting much of aesthetic values of other tribes of the Nilgiri hills.

Mrs. Pilgin Widaman, who belongs to Toda community and was official health nurse and social activist started collecting artifacts and stored in her house and who ever visits her house can know the culture of a native tribe and ecology of Nilgiri hills. But this members represents only Toda culture and visits can not know about the material culture of other important tribes of Nilgiri hills. Gradually with the help of her Prof. V.I Subramaniam, Vice chancellor of Tamil University, Thanjavur had started a tribal research centre (TRC) at Ooty and it was shifted to won buildings at M. Palada, 10 kms away from Ooty town with one of the main objectives of the TRC was an exclusive building for tribal museum in the 10 acre campus of TRC. The tribal museum building was constructed by Tamil University at TRC campus but only with few minimum numbers of tribal artifacts. The real life came to tribal museum of TRC when TRC was undertaken by the department of Adi Dravidas and Tribal Welfare Government of Tamil Nadu, Chennai. At TRC campus, M Palada, tribal museum building was fulfilled with many artifacts related to all six tribal groups of Nilgiri hills, beside a few from the tribes of other district of Tamil Nadu this museum reflected aesthetic values of Todas and Kotas but

not in a position to reflect the tribal values of Irulas, Kurumbas, Paniyans and Kattanayakans anyhow even today this tribal museum is attracting many visitors not only from India, even from abroad. This tribal museum has become popular because of the involvement of anthropologists, trained museum keepers and artisan experts from other part of Tamil Nadu. The IGRMS, Mysuru also organized one art and craft workshop by which the products of it has become still very popular in this tribal museum. Day by day this museum is growing with addition of varied artifacts and other materials cultures of Todas and Kotas, but still the authorities of the museum has to concentrate on the implements of Irulas, Kurumbas, Paniyans and Kattanayakans who are still living in inaccessible areas within the Nilgiri hills. The major suggestion by the visitors of the museum is the Director of Tribal Research Centre (TRC) should have approached the near by IGRMS, Mysuru for long duration preservation and chemical cleaning of the already collected museum specimens.

The CTRD Trust (Centre for Tribal and Rural Development) was established as a non government organization at Ealamanna village, Mango rage, Pandalur taluk in Nilgiri district at Bost hills of the hills during 1995-2000 by the founder Director Thiru Ranganathen, during 2001-2002 the CTRD also opened one tribal museum at its premises, mostly by exhibiting the artifacts and photos related to Paniyans, Kurumbas and Kattanayakans but their aesthetic values are not reflected in their collection or writings or captions. This museums particularly tribal museums can be successful only when it depicts tribal aesthetic values.

## CONCLUSION

Museum is defined in earlier days as a place where objects can be displayed which have historical and artistic values. Gradually Museum extended their activities by adding values with integrative approach with social and cultural context of the artifacts and other performing arts and crafts. Tribal groups as primitive human groups by maintaining unique cultures have creation art and aesthetic values in their way of life. This concept of tribal beauty evocativeness recently attracted the establishment and improvement of museums in the name of "TRIBAL MUSEUM". Tribal people think that their socialized belief system with desirable and undesirable values will help them to mold their behaviors and thought. If the tribal museum depicts the moulding nature of tribal thoughts in its display then the museum objects will be successful and survive long time and help the tribal heritage of Indian at global arena.

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