



***'Weaving thread, adding colour to life'* embroidery as the tool of empowerment among the toda women**

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Abstract

A woman has to be economically active and independent not just for the sake of her family. Financial independence will give her a new dimension of personal freedom. Women have achieved many heights in their professional lives and have been major players in the economic activity of our nation. *Although education provides women the skills to attain this financial independence, the prevalence of economic opportunities is crucial for her to make this seamless transition.* In this aspect, rural women face much more significant challenges than urban women in India. The widening of economy, exposure to newer markets and hence the avenues towards financial independence are much more broader for the urban women. In this context, creating 'culture-centric' economic activities will allow rural women to leverage their existing traditional skills and develop new proficiencies that translate these skills into economic freedom.

Traditional cultural practices and skills which are normally neglected in our education system might prove to be an effective tool in empowerment of women. Pottery, basket weaving, carpentry, traditional weaving and embroidery which are community specific, have added artistic colour to various communities. The talent which has been passed on from generation to generation, can be given new dimension to empower the communities in general and women in particular. The women self-help groups have been working in this enterprise and have gained appreciable success. The socio-economic empowerment of these women could only be achieved through these small groups, as the collective voice give them voice to face diverse personal as well as communal challenges.

An example of such a situation can be seen in the Toda women of Nilgiri district, Tamil Nadu. They have used their traditional embroidery skills to find their economic independence. This traditional activity has gained a new dimension in the current context of tribal development and tourism in the Nilgiri belt. Their unique traditional way of dressing up, which includes a special way of wearing heavily embroidered shawls has been showcased and attracted tourists across the world. This accompanied by their distinctive singing and vocal culture has given the Toda women a new way of utilizing their traditional skills to attain economic freedom in the new economy of tourism.

The present paper tries to explore the significant challenges, the Toda women face brought by the new economy.

Keywords: women empowerment, culture, cultural tools, skills, tradition, environment, nilgiris, toda, embroidery, Blue Mountains

Introduction

Women are the carriers of culture in every society. Though she is kept outside or rather considered untouchable from most ritualistic practices, it is she who transmits the finest expressions of culture to the younger generation. Concern for her family in particular and community in general makes her a natural cultural carrier. The little details she takes to decorate her household, the pain she takes to feed her family with delicious and nutritious cooking, and her art of managing friends and relatives of the family is constantly observed by her children. She consoles the sleepless child with her melodious lullabies and enchanting stories. These songs and stories are great comforters for her children not just temporarily, however, they are the pillars of psychological support during their growing years. These songs and stories are usually unwritten, and whenever they are reproduced acquire newer colour and meaning.

When a girl child is born into a household, the mother begins to train her daughter in all these routine activities. Nevertheless, the home which the mother thus builds will not always be as cozy as it has to be. The traditional role of a mother, who is a cook, who is subservient to the father, who in turn is the head, the provider and the decision maker of the family changes when the financial need of the family alters. The mother has to respond to the growing demands of the family. She has to accommodate a new role as the additional provider of the family. Apart from her traditional education at home she has to go out to the school and learn to face the society. With the support of the government and many private institutions educating girls has slowly picking up pace.

The language which is spoken at home might not be the same which is used in teaching at school. Universal education has opened newer worlds to girls who are otherwise confined to the four walls of their homes. However, the challenges of the new world take them away from home, the community and eventually away from their language and culture. There is a need to understand this linkage between the idea of development through universal education and making them lose the strong bond of culture and language leading us towards mono-culturalism.

This has led to alienation from the culture and the traditional life style. Education and development does not mean moving away from the home. This transition will not always be smooth and positive. Modern societies across Nations are facing the problem of migration. This problem becomes severe in the case of rural and tribal populations. Therefore, developmental initiatives must not be restricted only to financial development, which many times is individualistic, rather it should be an inclusive process of individual development placed in the development of a community. A woman placed in her home and locale accomplished with a traditional skill will certainly create a strong community. A woman empowered at home will carry the language, the tradition and their by the lifestyle of the community. This was evident during the field work undertaken among the Toda of Nilgiris.

The Toda were a predominantly traditional pastoralist tribe, who have recently turned to agriculture because of government and private initiatives. They were forced to become agriculturists because of the growing population pressure on the fragile ecosystems of the Nilgiris. From the colonial past, the Nilgiris have been subjected to 'modernization' in various ways. The grasslands and the Shola forests were acquired for developmental projects like construction of new townships, tea estates and hydro-electric projects, thus endangering the ecosystem of the region as well as the 'classic tribal enclave' ^[1]. The Toda way of life which is largely Buffalo rearing, is exclusively male oriented. The Toda women are prohibited from tending to the Buffaloes and related activities. Thus, traditionally, the Toda women are kept outside the economic activities of the tribe. However, Toda women are extraordinarily gifted in their embroidery skills which they practiced to decorate their clothes and homes. This traditional activity has gained a new dimension in the current context of tribal development and tourism in the Nilgiri belt.

The Nilgiris is remarkable for its flora and fauna. The cultural milieu of the area is also rich with varied tribal groups sharing the green hills of Nilgiris. Todas, who were the Pastoralists, Kotas the artisans, musicians and cultivators, Kurumbas the hunter-gatherers, originally inhabited this region. The Badagas arrived only recently in 16th century as agriculturists. In the colonial period, the region was transformed into the "seat of the government of the Presidency (province) of Madras". It was an important military base and many missionary stations were established. This development attracted people from the surrounding plains. These people came to the hills as plantation laborers; many came in to work for the British. This influx has not only affected the human habitats but also put pressure on the rich endemic bio-diversity of the Nilgiri Bio-sphere reserve.

The grasslands of the Nilgiri Hills are at least 3000 years old. Eminent Botanists von Lengerke and Blasco discuss the Toda practice of maintaining these grasslands through periodic burning. Conventional agriculture was introduced only after the advent of the Badagas i.e., some three hundred years ago. These grasslands were converted into tea plantations, eucalyptus or wattle plantations. This has resulted in severe degradation of the ecology of Nilgiris and its endemic species. During the colonial rule Ooty became the centre of British rule, which brought in many settlers from the plains. Accordingly many industries, institutions and religious organizations developed. This influx affected the cultural milieu of the Hills.

Prominent anthropologists like, M.B. Emeneau, Paul Hockings, David G. Mandelbaum, Anthony Walker agree that the Nilgiri groups, the Toda, the Kota, the Kurumba and the Badaga 'resemble the peoples and cultures of the nearby plains'. Though each of these groups has different languages, which are not mutually intelligible, they belong to the generic Dravidian type. The traditional economic, ritualistic practices of these groups are much like the jati system of the main stream Hinduism. Goods and services were exchanged between the specified families of these groups but there was no inter marriage. A kind of caste system that is similar in Hinduism exists. Despite these similarities, each tribe has its own religion and worships its own gods. Mandelbaum, the renowned anthropologist, who has done extensive work on the peoples of Nilgiris very aptly, describes the cultural milieu of the Nilgiris in the following words:

"In sum, these indigenous groups formed a human enclave. It was a distinctive combination of peoples, cultures, and exchange system that was quite isolated by geography and also separate in culture from the speakers of Tamil, Kannada and Malayalam who bordered the uplands on three sides. Nevertheless, no human enclave is an island entire unto itself. Despite the isolation, there were and are deep -rooted cultural linkages with other regions and with the wider civilization." (Hockings, 11)

Toda attracted the attention of European researchers because of their striking physical appearance. Men and women traditionally wear a white cotton robe crossed by broad red bands surrounded by black, blue or red colored geometric embroidery. Men adorn thick bushy beard, while women dress their hair in long ringlets on their side. Modern Toda wear their traditional cloths on ceremonial occasions. The Toda way of life which is largely Buffalo rearing, is exclusively male oriented. The Toda women are prohibited from tending to the Buffaloes and related activities. Thus, traditionally, the Toda women are kept outside the economic activities of the tribe.

Todas live in munds, a group of huts, with a dairy temple, a pen for the buffaloes and a shed to shelter calves. A Toda hut is called Arsh, shaped like a half cylinder is primarily constructed of wooden planks, bamboo, reeds

and grass. There will be a single entrance to the hut with a rectangular opening of about two and a half feet high by two feet wide. This is to out cold and dampness in these high hills. On either side of the doorway raised. The windowless hut in the interior is dark and consists of a single raised platform which serves both as sitting and sleeping area. On the farthest end of the hut the hearth is placed, which is the kitchen. This keeps the hut warm always. Upon the hearth wooden planks are laid to accommodate the utensils of the household, where Toda proudly display brass vessels.

Every mund will have stream that takes care of both the sacred and domestic necessities of the Toda day to day needs, a shola forest cover from which they get their daily sustenance and a grassland, to graze their majestic buffaloes. The female world of the Toda is restricted to the traditional household duties of cooking and cleaning; broomstick, winnowing basket, pounding grain symbolizing her woman world.

Apart from pastoralism, Toda are greatly known for their singing and song composing. Both men and women sing and compose songs. The ever singing and dancing Toda describe joyfully the beautiful Nilgiris which is their home. The song, minutely registers the changing seasons and the joy that comes with it. A singer need not go very far to get inspired. The clouds that gather during the monsoon, the dense dark clouds which every Toda await after a fiery summer with its silvery lightning flashes and rhythmic thunder become the background for a dance song. For example,

Song number. 15

1. Clouds rise in the sky./ Shade falls densely.//
2. Lightning flashes on the mountains./ Thunder thunders in the dry season.//
3. Rain falls in the black sky./ Thunder thunders in the clear sky.//
4. Beautiful dew falls./ It becomes the beautiful season of showers.//
5. Water springs forth in all the many (lit.seven) streams./ New grass flowers on all the many (lit.seven) mountains.//
6. From the buffalo that has recently calved milk leaks on its thigh./ The milk that they milk turns to the butter on the handle of the milking vessel.//
7. The buffalo that calved a year or more ago gives milk that runs over the handle of the milking vessel./ One ball of butter is filtered overflowing the kidy measure.//
8. The male buffalo climbs on the hindquarters of the female./ They bear calf after calf.//
9. The barren buffalo bears a calf./ The barren woman bears a child.// (Emeneau)

The opulence which is measured with number of buffaloes and the calves in the pen and with the number of children in the house is very well brought about in the song. This definitely is a thing which can be celebrated. The nature blesses with the life giving rains which makes the earth bloom with lush green grass which nourishes the buffaloes. The Toda household is overflowing with measureless milk and ghee. This song is composed for a dance to be performed for the re-thatching of the sacred dairy, wishes for a prosperous year ahead. The ritualistic life of a Toda which revolves round the buffaloes, both secular and profane, the dairies associated with these buffaloes, various life rituals from birth to death and the life in the Nilgiris is complete only when all these find a place in the songs. They address many of their songs to the buffaloes, as though they are their kith and kin. The Toda use a particular variety of tree for their ridge poles for the sacred dairy temples. The tree attains sacredness because it is used in the sacred dairy. Because of its sacredness the tree must be compared to buffalo which is inseparable from the Toda religious as well as secular world. Therefore, reading Toda songs one can conclude that the idea to sing and compose is to find oneness with Nature. This is time and again evident when a Toda praises all the 1800 gods who inhabit the Nilgiris. The entire Nilgiri Mountain range becomes the sacred abode of all the deities who are manifest in the form of mountains, rivers, streams, winds, sholas and the grasslands. For example, in song no.17, which is about the sacredness of Nodrs patriclan, the poet describes the divinity of entire Nilgiri mountain range.

Song no. 17, The song was composed by Tavkudrn, Pursu and Peidjkudr and dictated by Kanverdi.

45. Sacred place where gathers the meeting of the sacred places./ Sacred place which talks in the assembly of the gods.//
46. Sacred place which places its eyes on beautiful buffaloes./ Sacred place which puts its hand on beautiful places.//
47. Sacred place which goes to the meeting of the sacred places (at Muny mund, where 1800 Gods meet)./ Sacred place which goes to the assembly of the Gods.//
48. Sacred place where they do not walk making a noise of stamping./ Sacred place where they do not laugh noisily.// (Emeneau)

The song is important because it narrates how a Toda feels about the place in which he/she lives. It is the about of divinity which they all must respect. The last two verses speak about the reverence and esteem a Toda feels for the place where 1800 gods reside. Though Toda profess that they have 1800 gods, and each mountain and a stream is the abode of some god or the other, Teikerzi, the feminine force of creativity is the prominent god of creation of the Toda world on this earth. Toda refer to Teikerzi's act of creation as *leela* her act of playfulness created everything on this world. Ön, the masculine force, is the god of amondar, the Toda afterworld. Teikerzi not only created Toda people but also created all the people on the Nilgiris, gave them definite spaces on the mountains and specific professions. She created the buffaloes, the sacred dairies, munds and all the rituals related to these. Apart from sacred mountains and rivers, there are several villages which are sacred for the Toda. A

sacred village is referred as etudmad, it is from this village that the patriclan takes its name and the sacred dairy of the village must also possess the sacred Mani or the sacred bell. A sacred village must have a sacred dairy, and each clan will have various grades of dairies, each of which will have different ritualistic sanctity. A sacred dairy will have sacred bells which are used in every Toda ritual. The threshold of the sacred dairy is also sacred and a devotee touches the threshold of the dairy and bows down and touches the threshold with his/her forehead. Buffaloes are categorized as sacred and profane and the milk from these animals is likewise processed. Women are prohibited from entering into the sacred dairy and anything related to buffaloes. Toda are vegetarians, however, they sacrificed buffaloes during funerals. It was believed that the sacrificed animals would accompany the dead to their afterworld. There are various plants and trees which have specific role to play in Toda rituals. One can see that the Toda world revolves round many rituals and ceremonies. There are no idols of Teikerzi or other gods, Toda say that though she is supposed to reside in a particular Toda hamlet, Nodrs, she is all pervasive. Dr. Tarun Chaabra, a dentist by profession and a researcher and activist, who is working for the rights of the Toda, says that by sanctifying every object around them the Toda preserved the Nilgiri Mountains for generations.

It is not just the natural environment that has been altered; the cultural landscape has been severely hit by the immigrant and the new lifestyle. The symbiotic relationship between the Nilgiri communities was discussed on the basis of how these communities were inter-dependent for the procurement of food. Before immigrant population intervened with the ways of Nilgiri communities it was the Badaga who provided the millets and rice as they were the agriculturalists, milk and milk products was supplied by the Toda, Kota were agriculturalists to a little extent, they were the artisans, Kurumbas, Paniyas and Irulas lived in the remote areas of the thick jungles and were hunter gatherers. As mentioned several times as the social life of these communities was also affected Toda, Badaga and the Kota were the communities who lived in close proximity with the immigrant population. Their daily nutritional necessity was not much affected because they participated in the money market of the immigrants. Toda and Kota even took up jobs under the Europeans and were paid in cash for their services. Toda, being the vegetarians were not much disturbed, Badaga diet was also not much affected and the Kota as they followed the Badaga quickly and adapting themselves to growing vegetables for the town market and working in tea plantations. Seriously affected communities were the forest dwelling communities Kurumbas, Paniyas and Irulas as they were dependent on a very wide range of animal and plant species. They did not have a singularly identifiable profession and therefore remained neglected by the erstwhile British government and the Indian government as well. The new laws imposed by the government, of the prudent use of the forest and forest resources made them abandon hunting completely and taking up daily-wage employment on the plantations. The wages they got in these plantations were meagre and these communities faced severe malnutrition. They were unable to procure nutrition in their traditional way and neither their wages nor the new market could provide them with necessary nutrition. Analyzing this shift in food procurement strategies and its effect on nutrition, Paul Hockings in his essay, *The Cultural Ecology of the Nilgiris District*, very sensitively writes,

“In recent decades, the newer strategies have introduced and then managed intensively a few food species, for sale as well as subsistence. In the process environments necessary for self-sustaining symbiotic diversity have been reduced in an area or destroyed, while the propagation of patterns of economic dependence and concentration of control over resources have been in the hands of relatively few people. Thus, with a dominance hierarchy replacing tribal interdependence, the Nilgiris in the twentieth century are undergoing a very substantial but not altogether satisfying redistribution of access to and hence benefits from what are of course fairly limited resources.” (Hockings 375-376)

Since the beginning of 20th century Toda have been organizing themselves in various groups to voice their presence in the Nilgiris. All these groups came into existence to address a specific situation. Some such groups are Toda Welfare Committee, which was established in the year 1926. Ironically enough, no Toda was a member of this committee. This was formed under the chairmanship of District Collector and the members included Indians and British. This committee addressed some of the important issues that were of concern of the community. Polyandry, child marriage, buffalo sacrifice during funerals, reluctance of the male members to adapt themselves for agriculture, increased alcoholism, indebtedness, wife capturing and the defloration of prepubescent females were some such issues. This committee was responsible in establishing the Toda cooperative society in 1928, which would lend the Toda debtors the necessary money to pay their debts. The society was existent only for a few years because it failed to repay the government loans. After the Independence many societies have been established and have done fairly good job. Toda Uplift Society, in the year 1956, Toda Embroidery Development Centre in the year 1958, and Toda Self-Help Society in 1977 are some such groups which were established to address specific issues.

The Toda today practice both pastoralism and agriculture. The educated Toda have taken up jobs in government and private sectors. Toda have found jobs in industries like Hindustan Photo Films, Needle industry, Cordite Factory at Aruvancadu, National textile Corporation, and in government establishments like the Railways, Post and Telegraph offices and Tribal Research Centre.

However, the important and a crucial development is that the Toda women have found their traditional embroidery work to find them new identity. The rich red blue and black coloured designs on thick white cotton cloth have given their traditional potkuli an aesthetic edge. This has given them not just the economic independence but also a distinct Toda identity. The designs for the embroidery are again from their traditional lifestyle, the key figure being the buffalo horn. They also have other designs like the wild flowers and

mountains. According to Vaasamalli, the base color white is the indicator of innocence, the color red depicts adolescence and the black, which is otherwise, is considered inauspicious in the Toda context is believed to be symbol of maturity. The Toda women have been creative and have experimented with their embroidery skill on table mats, bags, jackets and runners. Many groups like Toda Nalavaazhvu Sangham, Key Stone Foundation and Poomphuhar (Tamil Nadu Handicrafts Development Corporation) together worked and they were successful in their efforts to gain GI Certificate¹, Geographical Indication certificate for their unique embroidery. Because of this certificate the Toda can be ensured of uniform pricing for their products and at the same time the art cannot be duplicated. This has also helped to market their products effectively. This “culture-centric” economic activity has allowed the Toda women leverage their existing traditional skills and develop new proficiencies that translate these skills into economic freedom. According to a survey conducted by Save Nilgiris an organization working among the tribes of the Nilgiris with the assistance of Tribal Research Centre, Ooty, the total share of these embroidery work in the economy of the Toda is around 15.15%, Buffalo herding and selling of dairy products amounts to a total of 62.80%, and cultivation, which includes agriculture and horticulture amounts to a total of 13.69%. These figures only indicate that the traditional lifestyle with a little intervention of modernity can be translated into a sustainable economy. The story of the Toda women in using their traditional skills to gain economic freedom is a journey in itself that can enable women in other rural and tribal contexts to understand their own strengths and attain the confidence to venture into entrepreneurship. The group of women wearing their richly embroidered shawl will very proudly present their work and are eager to speak about themselves. They also sing and dance for their visitors. The beautiful Nilgiri locales which is their home has given them the confidence to be free women in their own way. Toda women have pursued higher education and have gained post-graduation degrees from universities. However, this cannot be the case with every Toda woman. She needs to find herself in her own home.

Because a Toda woman’s spirituality originates from the Nilgiri Mountains, the buffaloes and the dairies associated with it. Toda have been strongly attached to all these factors in very different way today, because, all the above mentioned things and they themselves are closely interlinked. Likewise they have derived a new meaning to their singing and embroidery, as they bring them a distinct identity, a specialty. In spite of rapid urbanization and the loss of their lands they gain strength to survive with pride only through their traditional life style. This was evident when Nila Sen a Toda woman, the leader of Melgarsh patriclan women’s self-help group proudly displays and also wears the traditional Toda embroidered shawl, when questioned about Toda traditions. She proudly sings songs of her ancestors and she herself composes thereby keeping the tradition alive. One thing that was very conspicuous during the fieldwork done in Ooty, that the women of the Toda were the real cultural carriers. They know the importance of culture, at the same time they know how to keep it alive by bringing in required changes while administering it in real life.

¹GI Certificate: Geographical Indication Certificate indicates the specific geographical location or origin of a product and ensures their uniform pricing. It also insulates the art from being duplicated. This GI was awarded on June 13, 2013 (ref: “GI certificate for Toda embroidery formally handed over to tribals”, The Hindu, June 14, 2013)

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