
THE TODAS OF INDIA: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THEIR ETHNOGRAPHIC PRACTICES OF TWO DIFFERENT TIMES

Dr. Rewa Singh

Asst. Prof., Maharishi Law School, MUIT, Noida, Uttar Pradesh, India

Abstract: Time and again, the lives of Indian tribal have attracted the attention of national and international scholars. Though missionaries and administrators produced lengthy documentation and an account of tribal's life and their culture but this phase lingered on until the beginning of the twentieth century. The second phase began around the beginning of the twentieth century and continued until the 50s'. During this period, the focus shifted in favour of certain selected tribes and more intensive investigations were carried out in this regard. Various monographs were published for the resurrection of primitive characteristics of tribe but no description took into account the question of change and the associated repercussions. Towards the later part of this period, interest in the study of change was noticed among Indian scholars also. Tribes were seen as if they were gradually shifting from a static and pristine state to a state of change. Phrases like "tribes in transition" were popularized by the scholars of the then times. During 50's the studies on tribes were relegated to the backseat and village studies emerged as a new area of interest. Nevertheless, by 70s' tribal studies in India were back to the forefront. This time, though, the studies carried a humanistic understanding of tribal communities and took into account the affect of developmental processes and forces of modernization on them. The present research is exclusively based on the data collected from secondary sources. In the present study, aim is to locate the ethnographic practices of two different times. The present research is based on a comparative review of two accounts of the Todas, namely by W.H.R.Rivers and Anthony R. Walker.

Keywords: Tribal, Tradition and Practices, Todas, Culture.

Introduction: Time and again, the lives of Indian tribal have attracted the attention of national and international scholars. Though missionaries and administrators produced lengthy documentation and an account of tribal's life and their culture but this phase lingered on until the beginning of the twentieth century. The second phase began around the beginning of the twentieth century and continued until the 50s'. During this period, the focus shifted in favour of certain selected tribes and more intensive investigations were carried out in this regard. Various monographs were published for the resurrection of primitive characteristics of tribe but no description took into account the question of change and the associated repercussions. Towards the later part of this period, interest in the study of change was noticed among Indian scholars also. Tribes were seen as if they were gradually shifting from a static and pristine state to a state of change. Phrases like "tribes in transition" were popularized by the scholars of the then times. During 50's the studies on tribes were relegated to the backseat and village studies emerged as a new area of interest. Nevertheless, by 70s' tribal studies in India were back to the forefront. This time, though, the studies carried a humanistic understanding of tribal communities and took into account the affect of developmental processes and forces of modernization on them. The present research is exclusively based on the data collected from secondary sources. In the present study, aim is to locate the ethnographic practices of two different times. The present research is based on a comparative review of two accounts of the Todas, namely by W.H.R.Rivers and Anthony R. Walker. The present research is exclusively based on the data collected from secondary sources (library research and internet).

W.H.R.Rivers's account titled, *The Todas*, was published in the year 1906 where as Anthony Walker's account on the same community titled, *The Todas of South India*, was published after a gap of eighty years (in 1986). The present research does not aim to probe the changes that took place within the community but primarily it aims to understand the way with which the respective authors perceived the community and the differences which emerged due to a difference in their process of understanding. I intend to compare the two accounts based on underlying themes. Alongside, I am supposed to keep in mind their academic background as well as the historical setting against which they carried out their fieldworks.

W.H.R. Rivers: W. H. R. Rivers, born on 12 March 1864 as William Halse Rivers Rivers, was a man of many talents and interests. As a physiologist, psychologist, psychiatrist and anthropologist, he contributed and helped to shape the development of academic disciplines. His contributions to anthropology lie mainly in the development of systematic field methodologies and the shaping of the Cambridge University department of anthropology. Although Rivers is not taken to have contributed to the development of a particular theoretical position, his work towards the creation of anthropology as a science is probably his most lasting influence, which, although never achieved, did produce a systemization of field work and field methodologies, especially the genealogical method.

Anthony R. Walker: On the other hand, Walker was an undergraduate student studying at Osmania University, Hyderabad. It was because of his friend and a fellow-student, A.Gopal Krishan that he was exposed to the Toda people (in 1960). He was studying Indian cultural history, religion and philosophy at the campus. However, his interest shifted from Indology to anthropology and as a result, he applied for admission to the institute of Social Anthropology at Oxford. He chose to write his B.Litt thesis on the Toda but later, he shifted his area of ethnographic focus from south to Southeast Asia. He held research and teaching positions in Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore. His D.Phil. thesis and many other publications' were on Tibeto-Burman-speaking Lahu people. Somewhere down the line, his work on Toda was delayed. However, as he was staying in Southeast Asia, he made frequent (even if short) trips to South India e.g. in 1965 and 1969-1970. He had spent five university vacations (while he was teaching in NUS; 1974, 1976, 1977, 1978 and 1981) in the Nilgiris. This suggests that he was in touch with the Toda for close to twenty years. Still, he calls his study as a library study informed by fieldwork rather than field ethnography. It will not be wrong to say that Anthony Walker began his academic odyssey in the discipline of anthropology from the Toda people.

A Comparative Overview of their Works: Toda have been studied before Rivers as well. The first observer to produce an authentic record of the Toda, a Jesuit priest, preceded Rivers to the Nilgiris by close to three centuries. But Rivers was able to discover more than all the earlier writers put together. His findings corrected much of the earlier records on Toda. The monograph by Rivers centers on religion and social organization. In the initial chapters (until chapter XI), he has talked extensively about the dairies and the associated rituals. He talks about the sacred dairy cult but as one proceeds further one finds the "ready-made categories" (the term used by Rooksby in his Oxford B.Litt thesis, 1951) like, kinship, magic, clans, crime etc. Rivers's has tried to cover all the areas of the Toda life. *The Todas* comes out as all-inclusive account comprising of minute details, which the writer is aware of. He says in his preface that he was not interested in merely recording the beliefs and customs of people but wanted to demonstrate the anthropological method as well. The method to which he has referred is the collection of extensive genealogies and the information derived from this data could be further used to investigate other facets of social life including ritual. He provided seventy-two genealogical charts.

Since Rivers's time, much has been written on the Todas. Still his account is a marvelous piece of anthropological research. His book has an important role in the Indian Ethnography. What makes me more appreciative of Rivers's work is the veracity with which he has been able to bring about the intricacies of social organization of the Todas along with the minute details regarding the ritual practices, in spite of a short fieldwork. The impact of his account can be felt from my personal experiences and I am sure, it is the case in many other Indian universities where students are still taught that Toda is a polyandrous community. It has been more than a century since Rivers mentioned this in his monograph. This ethnography is regarded as a major teaching resource and a student of anthropology is supposed to know about this pioneering study. However, I feel, it has a drawback as the students know nothing about the Toda but a description, frozen and preserved with time. Rivers's account can be used as an introductory reading to understand how Todas lived 100 years back. The *Todas* contains examples of institutions like adelphic polyandry, social paternity, and female infanticide, the cult of dairy, pastoralism and extreme devotion. The era to which Rivers belonged highlighted on the anthropology of others especially isolated communities. The colonial definition of tribes laid emphasis on the isolated existence of tribal communities and the same parameter was used while studying Toda in India.

Anthony Walker's work deconstructs this view. In his book, *The Todas of South India*, he states that he does not wish to update the ethnography. Neither does he intend to focus on the changes in the Toda community. As per him, his chief concern is to correct the view of Toda society as an isolated, non-Hindu, 'tribal' people (as depicted by Rivers). Walker quotes Rooksby and refrains himself from castigating Rivers on the grounds of

'feeble awareness of the influence of surrounding Hindu culture' during those days, anthropologists were concerned with small-scale, rigidly bounded discreet societies and there was a lack of anthropological knowledge regarding Hindu social institutions.

Walker begins by discussing the social matrix of Toda and in his first chapter; he takes into account the relationship between culture and environment. He classifies his book into four parts; Chapter 1-3 where he introduces the Toda people and their social organization along with a detailed account on geographical features as well as the environment; Chapter 4-6 deal with the dairy cult and the sanctity attached to it; Chapter 7 covers the rites of passage Toda people observe as well as the various phases a Toda man/woman passes through; and in Chapter 8 he discusses the social history and the changes observed from 1891 to 1981 within the Toda world.

The order of topics chosen by Walker clearly indicates the difference in focus between River's work and his. Firstly, Rivers begins directly from Toda people and ends with the origin of history of the Todas (clearly reflecting the classical evolutionary streak, though he became a diffusionist later). Rivers's book contained thirty chapters.

I am going to focus on major points wherein Walker's account differed from that of Rivers and brought out the discrepancies in latter. It should be kept in mind that my derivations are based on the comparisons drawn from the two monographs.

Rivers's work brings about three primary features of the Toda: moiety, polyandry and pastoralism. Walker's account does not deal so extensively with the institution of polyandry. He has mentioned it in his account but nowhere does his illustration matches with that of the Rivers. Moreover, Walker found out that polyandry is almost extinct.

In Rivers's description, one can observe how central the role of pastoralism in the Toda economy is whereas Walker observes a diminishing trend in case of pastoralism and a parallel emergence of agriculture. As per Walker, the Toda retain interest in the buffalo which can be reasoned to the role of animal in religious rituals. However, the role of pastoralism as a means of subsistence has mitigated.

Toda thrive to maintain all the actions necessary to keep the purity of the dairies intact. It is oft quoted that Rivers led to the buffalo-isation of the Toda society. But both the accounts reflect that the sacred dairy cult forms the pillar of their religious life. The buffaloes and the gods of dairies are of prime importance. Women have a secondary status in comparison to the buffaloes. While examining the dairy cult, one observes two important concept, hierarchy and purity. Both the writings show that each and every element is hierarchically graded and higher the ritual status of the element the more purer it is. Special provisions are made to prevent it from pollution. It is well known, that the concept of purity and pollution are central to Hindu ideology and it is very much reflected amongst the Toda as well. So many similarities between Toda and the Hindus of south India show that Toda have never remained isolated and there must have been an unrevealed association between the two.

References:

1. Rivers, W.H.R. 1906. *The Todas*. London. Macmillan and Co.
2. Walker, Anthony R. 1986. *The Todas of South India: A New Look*. Delhi. Hindustan Publishing Corporation.
3. Unpublished notes on The Todas. Department of Anthropology. University of Delhi.
4. Patnaik, S.M. 1996. *Displacement, Rehabilitation and Social Change*. New Delhi. Inter-India Publications.
5. www.wikipedia.com
6. www.google.com
