

TWO SOUTH INDIAN TRIBES



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I. THE TODAS OF THE NILGIRIS

1. Their History.

The Todas of the Nilgiri hills, are among the most widely known of the so called aboriginal tribes of India. Foreign travellers and anthropologists have been attracted to this tribe, by reason of its highly ritualised buffalo cult and its practice of fraternal polyandry. The earliest reference to Todas is found in a Mysore Inscription of 1117 A.D., which mentions a fight between the Todas and the Hoysalas. But we owe much of our information about this tribe, to the writings of western scholars, though some of their statements and accounts are vitiated by their preconceived notions and unfamiliarity, not only with Toda culture and language, but also with the South Indian people, their habits and customs, language and culture. Anyone who desires to understand the Todas, must have a thorough grounding in the South Indian languages in particular, and of the culture of the south as a whole.

2. Population.

The Todas of the Nilgiris today number a bare five hundred in all. They are confined to a small region in the taluks of Coonoor and Ootacamund in the Nilgiri District, and live in scattered hamlets situated near forests, amidst beautiful mountain scenery, by the side of a brook or stream. The 'Toda Mad' as the Toda hamlet is called is a simple affair consisting of not more than four to five houses at the most, the dairy temple and the buffalo pen.

3. The Toda Hut.

The Toda hut is half barrel shaped, the like of which we see among no other tribe in India. It is a two roomed hut measuring 8 feet by 16 feet with a semi-circular roof made of grass, bamboo and rattan. The two end walls of the hut which are invariably gabled are made of thick wooden planks. There is a doorway two cubits high, and one and a half cubits broad in the centre of the lower half of the front wooden wall and a covered verandah in front of the wooden wall. To enter the hut one has to crawl on all fours.

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4. Their Appearance.

Handsome looking and impressive, tall and well built, with large and expressive eyes, and a prominent nose, a luxuriant beard and moustache which invest the Todas with a patriarchal look, dark curly hair trimmed so as to form a bushy mass round their head, a complexion that is of bright copper colour and the Putkuli, an embroidered white coarse sheet which they wrap round their body, all these add to their picturesque appearance. Rarely do we come across a Toda who can be described as dark in complexion. This is probably due to their stay for many centuries in a temperate climate like that of the Nilgiris, to their comparatively easy idyllic pastoral life, which does not involve much of a strenuous life, to the consumption of large quantities of dairy products such as butter, milk, ghee and butter milk, and their strict vegetarianism. All these have helped them to maintain a fair complexion which is denied to the other tribes, like the Kotas, the Irulas, the Badagas, and the Kurumbhas, who live side by side with the Todas but who are all non-vegetarians and who do not ordinarily consume such large quantities of dairy products as the Todas do.

5. Toda Women.

Toda women are more handsome looking than their menfolk. There is a cultured repose and leisureliness about them which the so-called women of the cultured classes in our society may envy. But like their sophisticated sisters in cities, Toda women also spend their time in toileting, in buttering their jet black glossy locks of hair, combing them, twisting them into strands and allowing them to fall gracefully over their neck and shoulders. But the rancid smell of butter, to which a town bred man is unaccustomed, will not allow him to stay near them for long unless he purposely puts up with the smell so that he may observe the Toda life in its native setting more closely. Indeed, Toda women have a charm and beauty of their own, which has been testified to by every foreigner who has visited them. In complexion they are several shades fairer than men. But these remarks apply only to women under thirty. After about thirty, Toda women seem to age quickly and lose both their charm and beauty. They tattoo their upper arm, shoulder and the portion below the neck. In their leisure hours they embroider the ends of their garment in several coloured threads and in diverse floral and

geometrical designs. Preparing food for the household, looking after children, bringing water from the spring for domestic use and pounding rice, are their normal duties. They have no right to property except the right to food and shelter.

6. Their Nature.

Frank and affable, cheerful and self-possessed the average Toda is communicative though circumspect, respectful though fearless and serious. Several centuries of self-sufficient pastoral life with strict adherence to bucolic ritualism had made him contented and indolent, depriving him of all legitimate desire and initiative, to adapt his way of life to meet the growing complexities of the modern competitive life. Tending buffaloes and milking them are the two occupations of the Toda male. He knows of no other and does not want to do anything else. But the buffaloes too are not now as numerous as they were before, for which again the practice among the Todas of sacrificing several buffaloes on the death of a Toda is mainly responsible. So, several Todas, out of sheer necessity have now begun to seek jobs as guards, watchman peons and teachers-all soft jobs at that, involving no manual labour at all.

7. Toda Pastimes.

The Todas have several pastimes to beguile their vacant hours. Stone lifting, competitive races, running, chasing, capturing, managing the more turbulent and spirited buffaloes and dancing on festive and funeral occasions, engage them in their spare time. Besides the average Toda is a great walker. Walking long distances on hills, with their ups and downs requires more than ordinary stamina, as I can vouchsafe from my own experience when I had to hike from Gudalur to Ooty in the company of some youths of my age about thirty years ago, a distance of about thirty miles. But to the Toda walking twenty miles a day is a child's play.

8. Their Songs.

Both men and women are clever at composing songs though, story telling is not one of their strong points. Buffaloes, perhaps, like songs more than stories; but I have not known an instance where the Toda sings and milks. However here is the translation of a Toda song in English,

which I owe to the courtesy of my young friend, Mr. G. N. Das, M.A., a Research scholar who has worked among the Todas for over two years. Even in this love poem, buffaloes figure prominently, indicating that the buffalo is inseparable from the Toda and the Toda from the buffalo.

Here is the song :

"The like of you was never born or made,
Hanging hair, how beautiful,
Your teeth, how beautiful,
You have beautifully clothed legs.
If you marry me,
As two leaves of the same shape and colour,
We will become one. Come.
As two buffaloes created out of one branch of a tree,
We will join. Come.
Let us go to the barrel shaped house there, Come.
We will give birth to hutful of children, Come.
Penful of buffaloes we will maintain, Come.
Potful of money we will have, Come.
As life not lived before we will live, Come.
We will live like our forefathers, Come.
We will have buffaloes as in olden times, Come.
To hungry men, food and charity we will give, Come.
To the thirsty, milk and alms we will give, Come.
We will request all men to assemble near our house,
Come.
We will request all men to assemble near our temple,
Come.
We will wear good clothes, Come.
We will wear embroidered clothing, Come.
You will wear ear-rings, Come.
We shall count our days singly, not separately, Come."

9. Todas are Vegetarians.

The Todas are vegetarians and their mainstay is milk and its byproducts. They do neither hunting nor fishing. But once a year when a male buffalo calf is sacrificed on a ceremonial occasion, they eat the flesh of the male buffalo calf.

10. Original Owners of the Hills.

It is on record that before the advent of the Badagas, who represent the majority of the population of the Nilgiris,

and the Europeans, the Todas were the lords of the soil. This is evidenced by the fact that even today the Badagas pay what is called Gudu as tribute to the Todas and the Government is paying them a quit rent for the lands taken away from them.

11. Todas and Drink.

Before the advent of the British, the Todas were utterly strangers to intoxicating liquor and drinks. In later years they took to drinking and drank heavily too. With the introduction of prohibition, however, their drink habit has been severely curtailed.

12. Toda Clans.

The entire Toda community is divided into two major endogamous clans, each clan being further subdivided into several exogamous units. Thus each Toda hamlet is inhabited by families of the same clan or sib. The lands in the hamlet belong to the clan and no individual has any right over them. But buffaloes can be owned by individuals. The buttermilk of the sacred buffalo alone is stored in the village dairy from which each individual of the village receives his share for his daily consumption. The surplus ghee of the dairy is divided among the villagers who can sell the surplus ghee to outsiders in the markets of Ooty and outside. The tribute called Gudu which the Todas receive from the Badagas is also divided among the members of the community. When the father dies, his personal properties are divided among the sons only, and not among the daughters.

13. Todas' Buffalo Cult.

The Todas have evolved a system of buffalo dairying with rituals which is peculiar to them and to no other tribe in the world. It is curious that the Todas do not maintain bovine cows but only buffalo cows which are classified as the ordinary and the sacred. Though there is no restriction about the mating of the sacred buffalo with an ordinary bull buffalo, the male calves born of the sacred cow buffalo are not considered sacred. Neither the physical appearance nor the colour of the buffalo distinguishes the ordinary from the sacred buffalo. The female calves of the sacred cow buffalo alone are considered sacred. It is round this sacred buffalo and the dairy that the Todas have built a highly complicated ritualised buffalo cult.

14. Sacred Dairies.

The dairies where the milk of the sacred cow buffalo is churned are the temples of the tribe. They are organised in an ascending order according to the sanctity of the buffaloes the milk of which is churned therein. The most sacred of all the dairies is the Ti dairy belonging to the Tarthar clan, the more important of the two clans among the Todas. Attached to the Ti dairy are a herd of buffaloes and pastures. The dairy is in charge of a dairyman called the Palol who is assisted by a boy. The Palol is ordained as such and has to lead a celibate and austere life, avoiding all intercourse with the outside world and with women who are forbidden to come anywhere near the dairy temples. Should Palol touch any one, he becomes polluted and loses his Palolship immediately. Reordination alone, which is a very costly and complicated process, will restore him to the Palolship. The life in the dairy is one round of rituals. I shall refer to only one of them. When he first greets the buffaloes, the first thing in the morning, he repeats a prayer for the welfare of the buffaloes, an English rendering of which is given below which I owe again to the courtesy of my good friend Mr. G. N. Das.

15. Prayer at the Sacred Dairy.

"May it be well.

May it be well with the buffaloes and the calves.

May it be well.

May there be no disease.

May there be no destroyer.

May there be no poisonous animals.

May there be no wild beasts.

May be kept from falling down the steep hills.

May be kept from floods.

May there be no fire.

May rain fall.

May clouds rise.

May grass flourish.

May water spring."

It may be noted that the prayer is not addressed to any particular deity.

16. Palol, the Dairy Priest.

The duties of the Palol, the priest, are various. Taking the wand, the symbol of his priesthood, and the bamboo

milk phail he goes out to milk the buffaloes. On opening the buffalo pen in the morning he prays in front of the pen, facing the buffaloes. After milking the buffaloes he attends to the churning of the previous day's milk. It is only the buttermilk of the sacred buffalo that is consumed by the ordinary Toda and not the milk.

17. **Toda Gods.**

Toda ideas of God and religion seem to be simple and the least complicated. The Todas speak of Tekirsi and *On* as the two chief deities who are powerful and omniscient. The Todas however do not consider either or both of them to be divine, but extremely human. Tekirsi, their chief Goddess, an extremely human person living the same kind of life as any Toda, is credited with having created the Toda for the buffalo and the buffalo for the Toda. She rules over the world of the living. *On*, the other chief diety rules over the world of the dead.

18. **Hinduised**

Besides the several clans the Todas have dieties of their own. Due to acculturation, the Todas also hold in reverence, Hindu Gods like Bettakaraswami, Karamadai Rangaswami, Mariamma, Palaniandavar, Lord Srikanteswara and Parvathi of Nanjungud in Mysore and several others. They fulfil like the Hindus a variety of vows at these Hindu Shrines, such as the shaving of their heads, offering Puja, feeding people and offering silver replicas of buffaloes so that their buffaloes may yield more milk and they may be happy.

19. **Fraternal Polyandry and Infanticide.**

The practice of fraternal polyandry among the Todas has been a theme of absorbing interest to all anthropologists. Competent observers are of the view that this form of marital life has been motivated by the desire to keep the family property in tact. If each brother had his own wife and the freedom to live alone, naturally he would demand his share of the property,—probably under the influence of the woman he has married,—and the family property would have to be divided among all the sons in the family. On the other hand if all the brothers had one wife in common, lived as one family and all the children born to that woman were treated as members of the family, there would be no need for the division of the family property. It is not enough if all the

brothers married only one wife while a large number of girls of marriageable age also were available for marriage. That might lead to complications and family feuds. If a brother in the family married any of the unmarried girls, in addition to the common wife of the brothers, there will be no end of troubles. So the Todas resorted to the practice of female infanticide to keep down the number of girls in the community. This naturally resulted in a situation under which polyandry became inevitable. For, what else can be the result, in the absence of a sufficient number of marriageable girls in the community, but polyandry? Under the system of fraternal polyandry the wife of one became the wife of all her husband's brothers, both living and those that were to be born.

20. Monogamy and Polygyny.

But this system is not now in vogue among the Todas as the legal ban imposed on infanticide at the beginning of this century has resulted in more girls now being born than before. The Todas also rose equal to the new situation created by the ban on infanticide. Now each Toda marries a wife whom he can call his own. But the system of polyandry has in fact given place to a system of polygyny under which all the brothers in a family have equal claims on the wives of his brothers and vice versa. By this process they have managed today to keep the family property intact. Though polygyny is now the practice among the Todas, they aver that they are monogamous. Both are true, in the sense that each brother can claim one woman as his wife and all the brothers can equally claim their brother's wives as theirs.

21. Cremation of the Dead.

The Todas cremate their dead. There are separate cremation grounds for men and women. The Toda funeral is an elaborate affair. The funeral that is performed shortly after death is called "the first day funeral". The dead body is kept in a specially erected hut and many buffaloes are sacrificed their number depending on the status of the deceased. Along with the deceased, jaggery, husked grain, husked barley, some rupee coins, sticks, a long pole or tada (Tamil Thadi or stick) bamboo vessels, a bow and three arrows, a knife, an axe and a palm leaf umbrella are burnt.

The menfolk undergo purificatory ceremony after the funeral. The hairs of the deceased are collected and kept as a relic till the dry funeral which may take place some months later. This seems to be a commemorative and propitiatory festival. Todas attend this funeral in their full strength attired in their best garment, particularly displaying the highly embroidered putkuli. Buffaloes are again sacrificed. Rice is distributed and men dance and make themselves merry. The hair of the deceased which is kept wrapped in a Putkuli is burnt and the ashes are buried under a stone in the allotted spot. There is no prayer at all at any of the two funerals. The Todas believe in life after death, but not in the spirits of the dead which according to them are neither malefic nor beneficent.

22. Toda Dialect

The Todas speak a dialect which is closely allied to the two South Indian languages namely Kannada and Tamil. Both Dr. G. U. Pope, the great Tamil scholar and Dr. E. B. Emeneau, the eminent linguist, incline to the view that the Toda dialect is a corrupt form of Kannada. It may be pointed out that the old Kannada is very much allied to Tamil. For a Tamilian like me the Toda dialect when spoken by the Todas in their peculiar way seems to have a Tamil ring about it. Toda words appear to be corrupt forms of Tamil words conveying same ideas. The Todas describe themselves as *Ohl* (ஆள்) which means a man. The Tamil word *Ohl* in Tamil, has the same meaning. This word in Toda parlance stands for all those attributes such as bravery, physical strength, independence etc. When a man is unable to get a thing done, or keep up his word, or fails to carry out a thing, he is usually rated by the remark "*Nee Oru Ala?* Are you a man?". (நீ ஒரு ஆளா?) Similarly the Toda word *Palol* really means in Tamil the Milkman. (*Pal-ol*-பால் ஆள்) The word *Toe* in Toda dialect stands for the cattleyard or the buffalo pen. It may have been derived from the Tamil word *Thozhuvam* (தொழுவம்) meaning a cattle yard. *Punet kalvol* is the sacred path which the Palol alone can use. In Tamil it will be *Punitha kal vazhi* (புனிதக் கால் வழி), the sacred foot path. *Murn* is the word for the sieve in the Toda language. The Tamil word is *Murram* (முறம்). *Kalmelpudithi* is a form of salutation offered to elderly Toda males by Toda women. In saluting the male, the woman takes the feet of the male with her hands and raises it to her forehead. The word

Kalmelpudithi may be the transmuted form of the Tamil word *Kaalai melay pidithu vai* (காலே மேலே பிடித்து வை). A study of the Toda dialect by Indian philologists, will yield results establishing the close affinity of the Toda dialect to the Tamil language.

23. Superstitions.

Though friendly to those interested in the study of their life and culture, the Todas loath any non-Toda seeing certain of their sacred objects and observing their rituals at close quarters. Prince Peter of Greece and Denmark who was interested in the study of the life and the daily routine of the sacred dairy of the Todas pitched his tent near a well known sacred Toda dairy. Being an European he enjoyed the patronage of the Government and so the Todas could not demur, purely out of fear and respect, to his pitching a tent and living in it near their dairy, though inwardly they were full of chagrin and chewed the cud of their discontent. The Prince was allowed to continue his studies and observation for some time, when he of his own accord struck his tent, his particular mission having been fulfilled. After the departure of the Prince from the scene of his operation, the entire Toda community was greatly agitated over this sacrilegious act and met several times to find out those Todas who gave Prince Peter of Greece permission to pitch his tent near the sacred dairy and discussed what punishment should be meted out to the culprits, if and when found out. But it is not known whether they found out the culprits and punished them, but the fact remains that even in the year of grace 1954, the Todas are a highly sensitive people, and resent greatly any violation of their age long traditions and customs. They are very conservative and highly superstitious.

The second instance relates to the photographing of a sacred stone in the Toda mad, by two Hindu friends, who were interested in getting the sacred stone photographed. They spoke to the Toda Headman concerned who agreed to their photographing the stone in case they helped him with money to rebuild his hut. This was agreed to and the stone was photographed which it is said, no one had done before. The Headman himself knew that he was doing a sacrilegious act in allowing the stone to be photographed, for when he brought the stone out, his hands were trembling and he was perspiring from head to foot.

When the other Todas came to know that the stone had been shown to non-Todas and photographed too, they all were greatly agitated and were profuse in their abuse of the Headman. A few days later however the Headman died. The Todas at once came to the conclusion, that the Toda Headman died a premature death because he did a sacrilegious act and he was rightly punished for committing an act which was against their established custom.

24. Todas now Build Modern Huts.

The Todas have now begun to build their houses just like the houses of any other with stone walls, cement, timber, roof tiles, windows and full sized doors. They find this type of house much more comfortable than the half barrel shaped hut. In the next ten or twenty years the half barrelled hut is bound to go out of fashion. It is a welcome change for the better even according to the Todas.

25. Toda Handicrafts.

The Toda women are clever at embroidery work, as the men are in wood carving, particularly of walking sticks etc. If the embroidery work among the Toda women is organised on more modern and business like methods, it may put some money into their pockets. But I wonder whether the menfolk would allow their womenfolk to earn money and thereby to become independent of men, even to a small extent!

26. Servants of India Society's Work.

The prevalence of venereal diseases among them has been the cause for sterility in women, the low birthrate and the high infantile and maternal mortality. On the initiative of the Servants of India Society a mobile venereal dispensary has been sanctioned by the Government and during the last two years it has produced remarkable results much to the joy and hope of the Todas. Several months ago, the 30 Toda women who had become mothers, an event unheard of in the Toda community in recent years proudly displayed their children at a Baby show presided over by Governor Shri Sri Prakasa. A school *cum* hostel for Toda children is run by the Servants of India Society near Ootacamund where they are fed and clothed and educated along lines consistent with their life and traditions. The entire community numbering about five hundred owns two hundred acres of land only

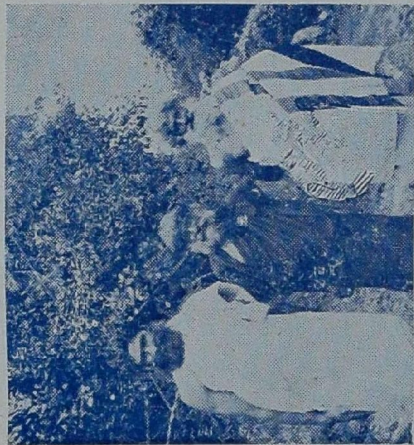
for potato cultivation. But this is all too inadequate to enable them to make a living. Adequate lands for pasture and cultivation, sufficient facilities for the improvement and care of their buffaloes and for organising their dairy industry on more modern and profitable lines will go a long way in rehabilitating the Todas. They are a responsive race and with goodwill on all sides, it may be possible ere long to bring them to the level of the average citizen.

27. Conclusion.

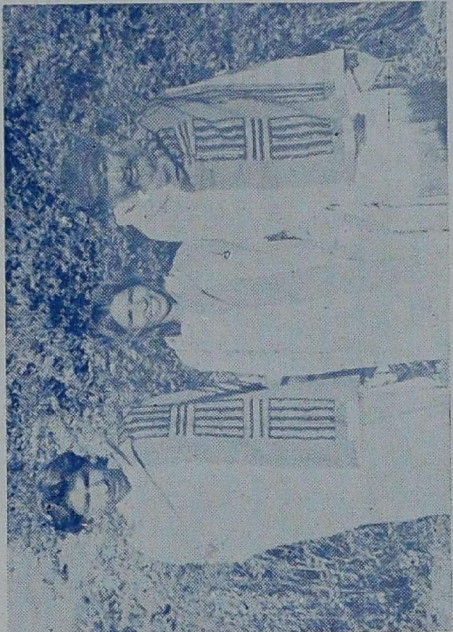
The overall picture of the Toda is one that compels one to commiserate with his present lot. The Toda has been more sinned against than sinning. Deprived of their lands of which, the Todas were the original owners exploited by unscrupulous neighbours and merchants, nurtured in the belief that they are a race that has nothing in common with their neighbours, weakened by a declining population due to the prevalence of venereal disease, rendered poorer by the diminishing heads of buffaloes, their main source of livelihood, handicapped by the severe curtailment of their grazing grounds and thus frustrated and forlorn due to the gloomy prospect before them, the Todas deserve well of every one who thinks well of this country.*

*An enlarged version of the Radio talk given by the writer.

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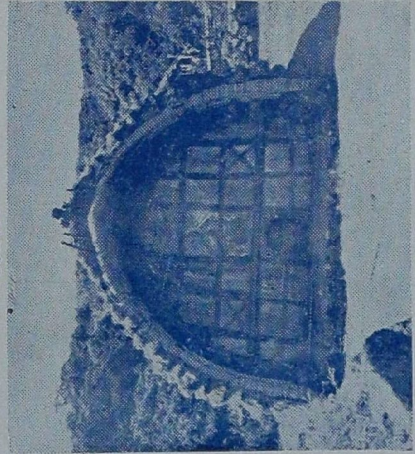
Two Todas with the toda priest in the centre.



Two Toda Brothers with their wife.



A typical Toda with his Putukuli.



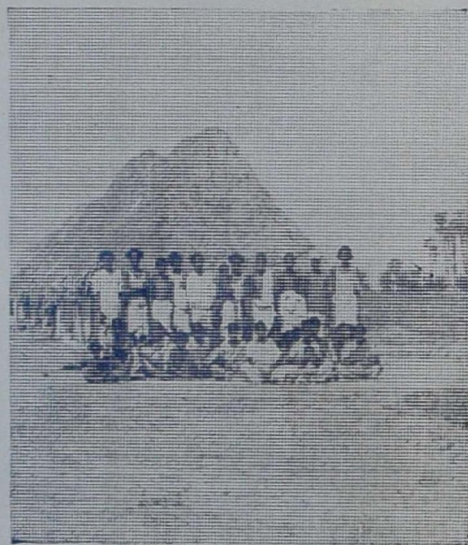
A Toda Temple.



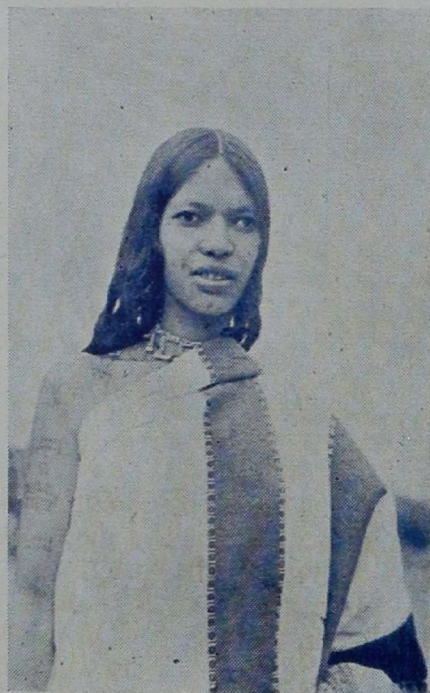
A villi family of Nayappakkam
Chingleput District



Villis of Chethupattu, North Arcot District.
Look at their primitive condition.



Villis of Nayappakkam. In the back ground is
the Colony of 12 families built by the
Servants of India Society.



A Toda Girl.

II. THE VILLIS OF CHINGLEPUT

The Villis (bowmen) of Chingleput District are members of one of the most backward communities in the State. Anthropologists aver that ethnologically and racially the Villis, (also called Kattu-Karan) the Yenadis and Chenchus of Nellore, the Sholagars of Coimbatore and the Irulars of Nilgiris, all belong to the same stock. But they are all in different stages of social and economic development; some, most backward and primitive, others, semi-tribal, and the rest who have completely shed their tribal habits and ways of life. The last category of communities are hardly distinguishable from the average citizen. All these however still occupy the lowest rungs of our social and economic ladder.

According to figures available, the Villis in Chingleput District number 9,460 of whom 1,282 are children of the school-going age. They are distributed as follows in the various taluks of the district :—

Taluks.	Popula- tion.	Chil- dren.
Madurantakam	... 2,000	200
Sriperumbudur	... 1,860	273
Chingleput	... 1,217	160
Kancheepuram	... 1,293	313
Saidapet	... 419	34
Tiruvallur	... 1,848	254
Ponneri	... 823	48
	9,460	1,282

Pattern of Life :—The Villis are generally described as nomadic. This is not strictly true. Whenever they find it difficult to make a living in the village, where they habitually stay, they migrate to some other village for some months in search of work, and return to their old abode when there is work in the village, and then again to another village if there is no work in their village. Thus the orbit of

their movement is the taluk or the district at the most. After some time they come back to their own village like the prodigal son. If you notice an uninhabited hut and ask for its occupant, the other Villis will say that the owner of that hut has gone to such and such a village and will return to his abode betimes. This has been the general pattern of life of Villis for generations together.

In the place of their temporary sojourn, the earth is their couch and the blue sky their roof. Neither worried nor dissatisfied with their lot, with no hope of a full meal, with nothing to boast of in the shape of worldly goods, leading the life of near bond slaves, fear and misery following them like their own shadow, the life of the Villis in general is an epic as well as an epitome of a dehumanised society.

Fear Complex :— Even though the Criminal Tribes Act has been repealed, the average Villi has not yet recovered fully from the old police-fear complex. This fear complex is still noticeable among a few. His women-folk however are not so shy as the male. Villagers in some cases, it is said, had been responsible in the past for bringing under the Criminal Tribes Act, when it was in force, the recalcitrant and unamenable Villis. Thus formerly they were obsessed with the fear of the police on the one hand, and of the mischief-mongers in the village on the other. This fear had taken away from them their manhood, initiative and self-respect.

Even to-day, I hear that in the town of Chingleput, a handful of Villis, suspected to be bad characters, are visited at night by the police at a particular hour, and if they are not found at that spot at that hour, they have to explain their absence to the satisfaction of the police. The more peaceful and law-abiding among the Villis, however, boycott completely those who are under police surveillance.

I wanted to see the Villis who were under police surveillance but none of them could be seen during the day-time except an old woman aged about sixty, sitting in the Villi camp and sorting out charcoal from the ashes, for selling it again to people in town. When I asked her about the menfolk she said that they had gone to the jungle to get firewood and would return only at dusk. To my next question, since how long they were living on the bank of the tank under the tree, she said with a smile that she had been

born, married and had given birth to children there and, had seen children also being born to her children under the trees on the tank bund.

Unsophisticated :—The average Villi is totally unconscious of the several handicaps and disabilities under which he suffers. He does not know the difference between joy and sorrow. He does not readily respond to one's queries. He looks to his village masters' hint for approval or disapproval, to respond or not to respond, to answer or not to answer.

The average Villi who is backward and primitive looks a frightened deer at bay. Several years ago when I visited one of the Yenadi colonies in Chittoor District, one Yenadi, racially a cousin of the Villi, ran for life on seeing me open my camera to snap him. The Villi of Chingleput is one better than his Yenadi kinsmen. He does not run away, but stealthily goes backward and disappears in the lane between the huts, never to be seen again. Lean, with unkempt dirty knotted hair, bare-bodied except for the cloth to cover his nakedness, an unshaven face with a goat-like beard, a set of teeth that appears to be diseased, the average Villi is not prepossessing.

Occupation :—Villis in towns are attached to households of the well-to-do and the middle classes as domestic servants, scrubbing vessels, washing clothes, bringing water, pounding rice, cutting wood, and as farm servants and watchers in fields either for a meal a day or some measures of grain or some cash. Both men women are habitual pounders of paddy and during the harvest season they get wages in kind, perhaps a measure of rice for the whole day. However, most of the Villis are law abiding, docile, indolent, having their daily meal when they earn and starving when they must.

Some of them work in rice mills, in firewood depots as woodcutters and in temples as bearers of lights and images during festive occasions. They collect the leaves of a tree called Seekanandazhai which they dry and powder and sell for a few annas. It is called Arappu in Tamil and is used by people for removing oil in their weekly oil bath.

The Villi women also do all types of domestic work. In addition, they collect firewood from jungles and sell it in

the streets of Chingleput town. They also collect the leaves of the Athi tree and sell them for a few annas. As the Villis are touchables they have access to temples and houses of Caste Hindus. Still the Villis may be said to be very backward in all respects. Those who live in towns are slightly better off economically, but their position in other respects is much more deplorable than those living in villages.

Adepts in catching snakes :—The Villi men and women are adepts in catching cobras and rat-snakes alive. They sell skins of the rat-snakes for about Rs. 3 and that of cobras skin for about Rs. 2. While passing a field or tank bund, if a Villi sees a snake hole he will not move out of that place before catching a snake. The Villi knows by certain marks outside the hole, if a snake is in it or not and also the habits of the cobra and the rat-snake.

The cobra, it is said, always rests keeping its head near the opening in the hole so that it may get fresh air. The Villis believe that it is not possible for the cobra to bite a person while it is inside the hole. The average Villi puts his hands into the hole with a dexterity and confidence that is really surprising and hair-raising. He uses a green herb as an antidote for snake bites. In the village of Valarapuram a young Villi woman of 25 is reported to have caught more cobras than any Villi male.

When the cobra stands erect with its hood spread, by his mesmeric power and use of mantra he makes it stand motionless, and catches it easily. He uses a stick with two prongs and while catching a cobra he deftly uses the pronged stick to pin it down to the earth making any movement impossible. He also uses a kind of noose with which the snake is caught. He never beats the snake to death while catching. He catches it alive and immediately removes its fangs and skins it while it is still alive.

Villis use several kinds of herb and roots as an antidote not only for snake bites, but for bites of all poisonous creatures. One of the Villis told me that there are three kinds of herb and roots which are used as an antidote. One of them is called Nava Kunji. Its root is eaten by the Villi before he goes to catch cobras and other snakes. He also eats the leaves and the roots of two other herbs called siriya nangai and peria nangai. These herbs are antidotes for the bites of 32 kinds of venomous creatures including snakes.

Villis also know the symptoms of the bite of different poisonous creatures by the changes that come over the victim thereafter. The man who is bitten by Pozhai Kattiri will vomit blood through the mouth and the nose.

According to them the most poisonous of the snakes is the hoodless cobra called Puttu Kalan. Pill Vetti is like the scorpion and if its bite is not treated in time the man will die. For a bite by the Thanni Nagan, the victim has to take his medicine sitting neck deep in water.

Villis showed me some of the herbs they use. They not only keep these for their use, but also administer them to others bitten by poisonous creatures.

While going out to catch snakes the Villi invariably takes a good dose of these herbs. They are said to be extremely bitter and should the cobra or any other snake bite the man it will die of the poison that is in the man's blood. The person who gave me this information, a man of about 60 told me that he had been bitten by very poisonous cobras on several occasions before he could remove its fangs, but he was saved because of the herbs.

"But are these herbs cent per cent effective?" I persisted in asking.

"Unavailing against fate," he replied pithily.

The Villis know the value of herbs for all common ailments too, and my servant who usually stays in Madras City, told me recently that his wife was effectively cured of some stomach ache by a herb, which was administered to her by a Villi medicineman. It may be worth while collecting information about the herbs and their application.

Economically, most of the Villis are in a much worse position than even Harijans. They are scattered in groups of five and six families in far away villages. Therefore meeting them in one place is a problem. One has to go from village to village to study their conditions and needs.

Economic Position: — Except in the villages of Oonaimanjeri and Nayappakkam, in all other places a large majority of Villis live in the open under the shade of trees, near temple precincts and in the backyards of houses of their landlords

and on the farms. Generally speaking the huts in which they live are not fit for a dog to live in. They are of diverse shapes; some are umbrella shaped, about four feet high and four feet in diameter; others are rectangular 10 feet by 8 feet with walls $1\frac{1}{2}$ feet high with a thatched roof. There is a doorway about 3 feet by $2\frac{1}{2}$ feet and one has to double oneself to enter the hut.

The Villis of Oonaimanjeri are cultivators and own huts, a small extent of land, and working bulls. They look sturdy and healthy, the result of hard work and a better standards of living. They look better dressed and refined in their manners than the ordinary Villi. Two of them own cows and sell milk to the Madras Co-operative Milk Supply Union. Some are engaged in cloth printing trade on piece-work basis and earn a few annas a day.

The needs of Villis may be broadly stated as follows :

(1) House-sites in the case of those who are earning and are in a position to put up huts ;

(2) House-sites, and huts to those who are without a place to live in and provision of some work for them ;

(3) Lands for agricultural purposes, a pair of cattle and agricultural implements and financial aid for initial expenses ;

(4) Starting a hostel-cum-school for about 30 Villi children in a central place like Singaperumalkoil or Chingleput or Athur, for the first three standards, relaxing all rules as a special case in the case of Villi children up to 10 years of age for admission into the hostel-cum-school ;

(5) Loans for purchasing buffaloes, sheep and milch cows recoverable in instalments through co-operative societies ;

(6) Training in useful and independent occupations which can employ them all through the year and enable them to earn a living.

Children :—The Villi children mostly tend the cattle of the village for a few measures of grain or some conjee. One boy told me that he had to tend the cattle for the money his father had received from the owner of the cattle. Villi children never attend schools as their parents are not keen on educating them and the villagers too are not willing to forego the services of these boys for looking after their cattle. While they tend the cattle the boys also catch rats,

snakes, hares and birds. I have so far visited nearly 200 families of Villis in a dozen villages and my information is that there is not even a single Villi boy or girl attending schools.

• I heard however that three young men had studied up to the fourth standard. One of them, I hear, is employed as a peon in the Chingleput Municipality. The rest are unemployed. In fact in Poonamallee when I told the Villis that a hostel-cum-school would be opened for their children, they promised me at first to send their children to the proposed school. A week later they changed their mind and were not prepared to send their children to the school even if free food, clothing and schooling were provided.

Songs and Dances :—Each Villi has a drum made of goat's skin which he beats while singing and dancing on special occasions and at the time he worships Goddess Kanniamma. At night he lights a fire in front of his hut or place where he sleeps and goes on beating his drum to the accompaniment of a song. The drum is his inseparable companion.

There are a number of folk songs in vogue among them. But I could not succeed in getting the correct texts during my visits as it is the women who are experts in singing these songs and they could not be persuaded to sing songs before a stranger.

Names :—The names of Villis generally are the same as those of the Hindus. They add, in some cases, a prefix to denote their tribe, as for instance Villi Vedachalam. The other names are Balaraman, Subramanian, Murugan, Narayanan, Gopal, Arjunan, etc. They have other curious names, such as Mannankatti (clod or earth) Vellai (white), Kosu (mosquito), Thoppai (big stomach), Jinnu (not known), Merkathiyan (man from the west), Palayathan (man of the Palayam), Kullan (pigmy), Mannikkundu (clock tower), Pachai (green).

Among women such names as Parvathi, Karuppayi, Ellammal and Muniammal are common.

'Kattu-Karans' :—The Villiars in Chingleput Town are also called Kattu-Karans meaning "forest dwellers" as opposed to the villager. They eat the flesh of goats, pigs, rats, rabbit and fish, but never beef.

Marriage :—The Villis are monogamists, but both the husband and wife can divorce each other and marry again. I did not come across a man having more than one wife at a time. Widows are permitted to remarry. From the age of ten, boys and girls are married and they are unaware of the provisions of the Sarda Act.

The bridegroom has to pay the bride's party a sum of Rs. 7-8-0 as pariyam, one sari and two and a half annas, as Mulaipalkuli to the mother of the bride for having suckled the bride in her infancy. The elder brother of the bride has to present the bridegroom with a silver ring for adorning the digits of the feet of the bridegroom, costing about annas eight, and the bridegroom returns the compliment, by presenting his brother-in-law with a rupee.

The marriage is a simple affair. An elderly Villi officiates as a priest. The beating of the drum and the singing of some songs suited to the occasion are the important items in such feasts but it has been given up now. No non-vegetarian dishes are served at the marriage feast; it is all vegetarian. The marriage lasts only for a day, and the total expenses do not exceed Rs. 30.

Pregnancy :—In the seventh month of pregnancy, the bride's parents come to the house of the bride, present her a sari and her husband cloth and take the pregnant woman home. In the third month after delivery, the parents bring back to the house of the bridegroom the mother and the child, along with a sari, dhoti for the couple and ornaments for the child, as presents. During child birth, pollution is observed for nine days, and the confinement is conducted by an experienced Villian woman. Children are suckled by mothers even for a year and also longer. However, some rice is given to the child from the seventh month.

When I questioned as to what would happen to these children if the mothers had not enough breast milk to feed them, they laughed and said that it was an unheard of thing in their community. The child is given a name on the ninth day after both the mother and child, have bathed and then follows a feast.

During the monthly period, the Villi women observe pollution for three to four days as the Caste Hindus.

Villis, before they bury the dead, pour milk into the mouth of the dead, then bathe in a tank and offer sesamum and water to propitiate the departed spirit. Then a feast is

held to which all the relations are invited. The expense will be about Rs. 10. They observe pollution for ten days as the Hindus do. There after neither any worship is offered nor any ceremony is performed in memory of the departed.

Religion :—Though the Villis are Hinduised, they worship their own Goddess Kanniamma. In the months of April and May, they go to the temple of Kanniamma and shave the heads of their children, both boys and girls, and offer the hair to the Goddess. This is invariably done by every Villian who has a child up to ten years of age.

Tattooing in the forearms of both hands is common among both the sexes. The patterns are called Elumichan Kothu—bunch of limes, Krishnan thottil—cradle of Krishna, Kilikkundu—the parrot's cage, Kamalam—lotus, and Thel pachai—scorpion tattoo. Women have others which are called Avaraippandal, a pandal for the bean, on her upper forearm and Kuttuvilakku, the bell metal Indian lamp on her left thumb. To have all this tattooed they pay the Korava woman three to four annas.

Some of the Villiar cannot tell the ages of their children, the number of months in a year and the number of days in a week. It was amusing to see the more intelligent wife coming forward and prompting her husband to say that the child was two years old, there were 12 months in a year and seven days in a week. In repeating it, he confidently asserted that there were eight days in a week, much to the merriment of all those assembled.

The Villis in Chingleput Town are in a class by themselves. I could not believe my eyes when I was shown some women as Villi women. Most of them have cultured, well proportioned and pleasing features. This is said to be due to the kind of free life that Villi women lead. Their present mode of life, of sleeping on tank bunds in the pials and back-yard of houses, seem to provide them opportunities for practising prostitution. The Villi community does not look upon this evil among them with either horror or dislike. They think nothing wrong in their women going astray, because they earn a rupee or two daily to supplement their meagre income. Their objection is for their women consorting with men of lower status.

THE REHABILITATION OF THE VILLI

Work by the Servants of India Society

The Government of Madras have taken steps to settle the Villis in colonies, so that they may pursue some occupation and lead a normal life. One such colony is the Villi colony at Dorainallur, about twenty miles from Madras on the Nellore road, and about 5 miles from Ponneri. So far about twenty families have been settled. Each family is given three acres of land, a pair of bulls, a plough, and a well for irrigation purposes. During the agricultural season they raise only one crop of paddy, as the water supply is inadequate for a second crop. In the off season the Villis go out of the colony in search of employment to distant places and return only during the cultivation season, only to find their huts, lands and cattle deteriorating. One of the colonists who was of great help to me in pushing through the housing scheme in the colony, left the colony all on a sudden, as a contractor had offered him a salary of Rs. 60 per month for collecting a herb called Navagunji, which is exported in large quantities outside India. He has gone to Kurnool to scour the hills for this particular drug, leaving his house and lands in the colony, to their fate.

The only way to remedy this evil, is to create conditions in the colony and in the neighbourhood which will keep the colonists fully engaged all through the year, and which will obviate the necessity for the Villi to seek employment in distant places. Water facility atleast for raising two crops in a year, the introduction of subsidiary occupations like poultry farming, beekeeping, sheep rearing, vegetable gardening, weaving and other profitable cottage industries will keep them engaged during the slack season. Therefore, it is necessary to work out a complete and comprehensive scheme which will prevent the colonists from seeking jobs two hundred miles away, thus defeating the primary object of colonising them. It will not much matter if they go to work within five miles radius and return home at night. If, in a small colony like that at Dorainallur, two Villis go out of the colony in search of work it has a demoralising effect on the other colonists. One way of solving the problem has

already been suggested, namely the provision of adequate water supply for irrigation purposes and the introduction of subsidiary occupations. But this in itself may not lead to the desired result. Atleast for a period of three years, the administration of the colony must be in the hands of an official of the Co-operative department or under the supervision of a representative of a well known social service organisation, who will be the philosopher, friend and guide to the Villis.

The Servants of India Society has been engaged during the last several months in providing huts to those homeless Villis. This has been made possible by a grant received from the Government of India which the Harijan Welfare department gave to the Servants of India Society for housing the Villis. So far eleven families in Ponneri, seven in Minjur, nine in Dorainallur and eleven in Nayappakkam making a total of thirty eight families have been provided with huts. The average cost of each hut comes to rupees fifty.

An improved type of huts with asbestos cement sheet roofs is now being provided for eighteen families in Chingleput at a cost of Rs. 300 each. The work is progressing and will be completed before the close of the current official year.

One matter however has been impeding the progress of this, namely, the delay in issuing orders permitting the construction of huts on poramboke lands for Villis by the Revenue authorities. The Society has undertaken this work in anticipation of getting early orders from Government, assigning lands for housing the Villis. But so far, the orders have not come. Meanwhile the vested interests in one particular village, it was complained to me, had compelled the Villis to work gratis for them for the sin of having put up huts on poramboke lands, even though the Villis have been living on the said poramboke land for generations together, under the shade of the trees. The provision of huts to enable the the Villis to live permanently on the land has roused the envy and hatred of the vested interests. Thus the difficulties of Villis in the villages, when they have none to look to for help, can be well realised.

The solution lies in Government issuing early orders in favour of Villis, permitting them to put up huts on poramboke lands, short of the right to sell or encumber the site. The village officials should be duly informed of the order and due publicity should be given to it in the villages; lest the difficulty mentioned above should recur.

By nature the Villis are timid and I will not be surprised if they leave the new hut and the village in search of employment elsewhere yielding to the threats of the anti-social elements in the village.

However the Servants of India Society has taken care to get an undertaking from the public-spirited and leading residents of the village that they would look after the interests of the Villis, and help them in times of need. But nothing is so effective in the village, to silence the anti-social elements, and nothing gives so much of confidence to Villis, as an order from the Government authorising them to live on poramboke lands.

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