

Todas: A shrine to the buffalo

By sharonstjoan

May 9, 2010



At his village, Pothik, the Toda elder, sitting in front of the main buffalo shrine

While we are speaking with the Kurumbas, Pothik, the Toda elder, sits quietly. At the end, he invites me to go to visit his village. He shows me a beautiful shawl, handmade by the Todas. It is really beautiful, but I explain to him that I cannot buy it. There's no possible way that it can fit into my baggage to go back on the plane. He expresses no disappointment at all and is very gracious—though I know he has brought it in the hope that he might sell it. So I buy it anyway. Somehow it fits into my baggage and comes back, as a gift for someone.



How not to take a photo--all lined up in a row

On the way in the car to his village, we pass a gothic-style church, St. Steven's, high on a hill, built in colonial times by the British. Pothik points it out to us and explains that the site where the church stands used to be the central place of worship where the Todas from all over the Nilgiri Hills gathered. It is on sacred ground. He says that the Todas no longer go there now because it has been taken over and made into a church.

My guidebook says that this took place in the 1820's, but to Pothik this happened yesterday, and clearly there is a sense of pain at the loss of the sacred site.

Karsh Mund is the name of his village and is one of several villages where the remaining 800 or so Toda people live. Around six houses are set against a hill, with about 35 residents. The grass-covered hill, a few hundred feet up, is very clean, and there is no trash. A couple of cows graze further up the hill. Two women sit outside on the ground, working on embroidering their traditional white shawls with red and black patterns.



Young Toda woman doing embroidery on a shawl

Near the top of the little hill, we can see barrel-like wooden structures, with standing stones scattered on the way up the hillside. It is immensely peaceful—like stepping into another century.

Pothik leads Mr. Kumaravelu and I up the hill to show us the shrines. These are the focus of their spiritual tradition, which is the worship of the buffalo. Dr. Nanditha Krishna, who is not with us now, but who tells me this later, says that they may be the only hunter/gatherer tribe in the world who are vegetarian.

The Todas have never eaten the meat of the buffalo or other meat, though they do use buffalos for milk. They will also sacrifice one buffalo at the funeral of a Toda person, to accompany the person into the afterlife.

They used to have around three hundred buffalo in this small village, but now there are only about thirty left. They are in the forest grazing, so we cannot see them. When they are led back, they will stay in an enclosed corral, which we can see. Near the corral are three of the barrel-shaped wood structures, which are shrines to the buffalo. One of them has a beautiful carving on the front wall—of a buffalo head with long horns. Pothik tells me that he carved this himself thirty years ago.



The shrine with Pothik's carving of the buffalo head

There is no large entrance to the shrines. Only a very small door in a side wall that one must crawl through to enter. Only the priest (Pothik) is allowed to go inside and perform the rituals. The tiny door in the front wall is not used.

It has been a great privilege to visit these people.

In former days, many thousands of Todas inhabited the Nilgiris, with a unique, thriving culture, based on the worship of a sacred animal, the buffalo. They lived a peaceful life, creating their beautiful shawls.



View up the hill from the village

The Toda lands are now protected as part of the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve, designated as an International Biosphere Reserve by UNESCO and are under consideration to become a World Heritage Site.

Photos: Sharon St Joan