

Religious Beliefs, Indigenous Communities and Environmental Preservation in Western Tamil Nadu, South India.

As we are grappling with the seemingly irresolvable dichotomy between consumption needs and conservation imperatives the traditional, mutually influential linkages between religious beliefs and environmentally harmonious consumption becomes more and more relevant. From 1967 when UCLA history professor Lynn White provided a historical interpretation of the current ecological crisis there has been extensive intellectual discourse on the subject of relationship between religion and ecology. He believed in the theory of dichotomy between the western Judeo-Christian, Islamic traditions and environment where by their anthropocentric values were argued to have contributed to ecological degradation as nature was completely made subservient to human welfare (White 1967).

On the contrary Indian religious traditions were described to have emphasized the harmony and symbiosis between nature and human kind. Some Indian scholars argue that Hinduism propounded the presence of divinity and the creator, Brahma in everything that was created promoted a humane attitude toward ecology (Dwivedi 1987). The Buddhist tradition with its emphasis on ahimsa, compassion and reincarnation also produced positive and harmonious relationships between nature and humankind (De Silva 2001). The religious beliefs of indigenous communities that promote nature worship have exhibited an ecologically sustainable livelihood model all over the world. The traditional, local communities of western Tamil nadu have for many centuries adhered to a peaceful co-existence with their immediate physical environment and their religious and social

organization reflects their concern for the environment, an understanding of which will contribute to greater clarity about the relationship between religion and environment.

There are many indigenous and local communities that inhabit the Blue Mountains or the Nilgiri hills of the Western Ghats, which is recognized to be one of the twelve mega biodiversity areas of the world. The Todas, Badagas, Kotas, Irulas and Kurumbas are the major local communities of the mountains. The earliest community to settle in the Blue Mountains are the Todas, who are endowed with very distinct racial characteristics (Rivers 1906). They form a minuscule segment of the population in the Udhagamandalam district in Tamil nadu and occupy the highest altitudes of the area. The Badagas are the largest indigenous community of the hill district and are traditionally engaged in mountain agriculture (Hockings 1989). Their linguistic similarities with kannada and their very nomenclature indicate that they must have migrated from northern areas, from the adjoining Mysore region. The Kotas are the traditional musicians and the Irulas are the traditional practitioners of magic and medicine in the hills. They are conspicuous among Indian tribal communities as they worship Lord Vishnu. These four communities of Todas , Kotas , Irulas and Kurumbas are supernaturally related as they are considered to descend from a single supernatural paternal source.

The Kongu Vellala Gounders are one of the most populous and indigenous communities of western Tamil nadu; they primarily practice agriculture though a considerable portion of them living in the urban neighborhood have taken to modern occupations and business (Beck 1972). Their caste nomenclature is derived from the traditional name of the western Tamil nadu region, the Kongu nad meaning the land of

the Kongu people. As their traditional geography is located in the vicinity of the Western Ghats it is characterized by profoundly eroded mountain type surface and therefore their land is known as Kongu land (in Tamil mountain land). They inhabit predominantly the districts of erode Coimbatore, Tiruppur, Karur, Namakkal and Salem. They are also found in the adjoining districts Dindugal (Palani, Oddanchathiram, Vedasanthur taluqs) Trichy ,Krishnagiri, Dharmapuri and Ooty. A portion of their population is also found in the neighboring states like Karnataka and Kerala that were integral parts of the undivided madras state in the independent period and madras presidency in the colonial era. They are the traditional worshippers of Shiva even though historically their territory had seen the widespread influence of Jainism, remnants and relics of which are found in a number of places like vijayamangalam and jinapuram. They are one of the dominant castes of western Tamil nadu as they possess considerable population strength, economic wealth, political power and relatively higher ritual status. A lot of other indigenous and local communities are found here and among them the Vettuva Gounders, Sengunthar Mudaliyars, Saiva Pillamars and Mannudaiyars are important. The notable feature of distinction between Kongu Vellala Gounders and other indigenous communities in western Tamil nadu is their elaborate social and religious organization that possesses intimate linkages with totemic symbols.

Religion and Faunal Preservation

The religious beliefs of these indigenous communities are based on a regime of utilitarian preservation of the faunal components of the natural environment. The Todas of Blue Mountains worship buffalo as their sacred animal and as a result their economy,

culture, society, morality and spirituality all revolve around that totemic animal (Rivers 1906). The conception of life, gods and goddesses, priesthood, rituals, festivals and after-life destinations are intrinsically and innately interwoven with buffalos. Economics (production, distribution and consumption) are intimately connected with the herding of buffalos and the products prepared from them. All social institutions, practices and values like marriage, divorce and inheritance are governed by buffalo worship based stipulations.

The buffalos of the Todas are divided into two categories: sacred buffalos and secular buffalos. Being lacto-vegetarians the Todas spend all their attention in different activities associated with buffalo pastoralism like herding, milking, churning, butter and ghee preparation. As buffalos determine their moral and material universe they never harm or slaughter the totemic animals. They always believe that their buffalos are endowed with human qualities like intelligence and compassion. They consider that their primary deity *On* created its offspring god known as *Pithi* who in turn created the buffalos. Their mythology asserts that in the order of creation the buffalos enjoy precedence over human beings. In fact the breed of Asiatic water buffalos known as *Bubalis Bubalis* that apparently branched off from the rest of the species some seventeen centuries ago have managed to survive only because of their symbiotic association with Todas pastoralist's culture.

As they adhere to a strict vegetarian diet mostly based on buffalo milk products they never kill their sacred and secular animals. Nevertheless the annual ceremony of *Kona shastra* proves to be an exception. In this purely religious festival they take a young

buffalo calf to a designated place near their temple outside their settlements and slaughter it. The flesh of the animal is roasted in the sacred fire that is made by burning the sticks and wood of kers tree and ultimately served as ritual food to all the participants of the ceremony (Frazer 1922 ,294).

The concern and attitude of the Todas is not exclusively restricted to buffalos as other animals in the region are also treated with kindness. Being lacto-vegetarians they never kill or maim the animals in their forests for their food, a noteworthy feature especially in the context where all their neighbors relish non-vegetarian food. They consider tigers as a kind of supernatural guardian of their culture and therefore do not kill them even when their sacred and secular buffalos are subjected to tiger predation (Wildlife trust of India 2008)

The funeral rites performed in Badaga culture is indicative of the relationship between their religious beliefs and faunal population. Among them the rituals for posthumous transference of sins committed by a human being to a buffalo calf are traditionally performed moments before the cremation to assist the final journey of the departed soul towards the ultimate union with God (Frazer 1922). The conventional estimation of sins possibly committed by the concerned human being is approximately around 1700 in Badaga tradition. They conduct rituals in which they recount the sins and transfer them to the chosen buffalo calf. The traditional altruism of the Badagas can be appreciated as a lion's share of the sins is related to killing or maiming the animals. Killing a crawling snake, a lizard, a great lizard, a frog, a cow, a buffalo, birds are recited to ask for forgiveness. Wasting the dried firewood, breaking a growing plant, plucking the

leaves of a plant or sapling and throwing it in the scorching sun and coveting the fertile crops of the neighboring fields are also sins mentioned in the final rituals. Spitting in the river and polluting the river with waste are among the crucial sins committed against nature. As the departed soul prepares to enter the heavenly abode its sins are recited and transferred to the chosen buffalo calf. Once the aforementioned ritual is completed the calf is set free and is never used for secular and economic activities as it had become a sacred anima (Frazer 1922)

The totemic relationship between animals and different segments of Kongu Vellala Gounders reveal the relationship between religion and animal preservation. The Kongu Vellala Gounders occupy a unique place among the mainstream communities of western Tamil nadu as their religious and social organization is structured around totemic principles. Dissimilar to other communities they have managed to retain social, cultural and religious facets of totemism while other communities seemed to have lost them in the face of ascendant forces like modernity and sanskritization. This community is divided into more than two hundred segments called *kootams* that are characterized by the avoidance of endogamy in intra *kootam* relationships and preference towards inter *kootam* exogamy. Each *kootam* possesses a sacred relationship with a particular animal, plant or natural forces and therefore known by the nomenclature of its totem. The totemic symbols of the Kongu Vellala Gounders include a wide variety of domestic animals, birds, wild animals, fishes, trees, flowers, vegetables and grains (Chinnasamy 2005, 31).

As far as animals are concerned, the different segments of Kongu Vellala Gounders have totemic relationships with wild animals like tigers, elephants, snakes, foxes, squirrels, tortoises, and bears. The important domesticated animals that are considered as totems include bulls, cows, horses, goats, dogs and buffalos. Many Kongu Vellala Gounder segments also have sacred relationships with bird species like peacock, owl, *annam* and eagle.

Traditionally the Kongu Vellala Gounders are the agricultural community they have a number of *kootams* having sacred linkages with domestic animals that are indispensable in their cultivation. A *kootam* known by the name *mayilam kootam* has sacred centers in places like kadaiyur, karumapuram. This segment possesses a special relationship with a breed of cattle called mayilai and its nomenclature is derived from this animal. In the northern parts of the north Kongu land the *medi kootam* people are found. In classical tamil *medi* meant buffalo. This *kootam* considers buffalos as its sacred symbol and their settlements, called *padai veedu*, are found in several places in northern parts of the traditional Kongu land (Natarajan 2006).

One of the largest social segments of the Kongu Vellala Gounders is the *kaadai kootam* people who have a special relationship with kaadai, a small bird found in the wild in their neighborhood (Krisnasamy 1983, 13). Each *kootam* has developed a set of rules and regulations that govern the attitude of the totemic people towards their totemic animal. The members of the *kootam* never kill or hurt the animal. They express their sympathies to the totemic animal that is accidentally injured or hurt by others. A complex set of

taboos are followed by each *kootam* towards the animal of its identity and a wide spectrum of animals and plants of the region are identified as totemic symbols by Kongu Vellala Gounders.

The *kaadai kootam* people do not consume the meat of their totem, a delicacy served in most of the non-vegetarian hotels in western Tamil nadu. In the traditional families the members even do not go to the hotels where the *kaadai* meat is cooked and served as a recipe. The *Andhai kootam* people never adopt a hostile attitude towards their symbol, the owls and will stop others from hurting the nocturnal bird. The *sengunni kootam* people avoid the consumption of *sengunni* fish (Balan 2009). They even abstain from eating ribbed guard as it has a physical resemblance to their totemic animal. The kannan kootam people do not eat the eyes of the animals even though they prefer to eat a plethora of animals like goat, chicken and fish (Chinnasamy 2005, 37)..

The *kootam* based social and religious organization of the Kongu Vellala Gounders is currently subjected to immense pressures from a variety of forces and factors like sanskritization, modernity, and migration of educated youths. Nevertheless, traditionally the *kootam* based religious and social life promoted a balance between their consumption needs and conservation imperatives and as a result of these eco-friendly beliefs biodiversity and the environment came to be preserved.

Another dimension of the altruistic attitude of Kongu Vellala Gounders towards the animals is to be found in their Pongal celebrations. The third day of the pongal festival is celebrated as *maattu pongal* by the Kongu Vellala Gounders where their cattle are washed, decorated and their horns are freshly painted. The people feed their cattle with

pongal and through this festival and a host of associated rituals the Kongu Vellala Gounders show their gratitude to the farm animals for all their assistance in their agricultural activities (Chinnasamy 2005).

Religion and Floral Preservation

The Todas have a close and intrinsic relationship with a number of plants found in their neighborhood. In fact the word Toda is believed to mean a sacred tree in their language. Among the numerous plants found in the biodiversally rich Blue Mountain range of the Western Ghats the *kers* plant is the most important in the religious and cultural life of the Todas. The bow and arrow ceremony which indicates the clan into which the child of a Toda woman is to be born and determines the sociological paternity of that child is conducted under the sacred base of the *kers* tree (Thursten 1975). In this birth right ceremony a small cavity is created at the basal trunk of the hardy tree and a holy lamp is placed in it before the presentation of bow and arrow to the expectant mother by the prospective father of the child to be born.

Toda marriages always take place under the sacred tree where all the members of the community assemble to bless the couples. A particular *kers* tree may be adopted by a few Toda settlements as the traditional and sacred venue of marriage.

From the cradle to the grave the *kers* tree is accorded with great significance in the culture of Todas. In any funeral the corpse is always covered with the wood of the *kers* tree before the pyre is lit. The Toda priests always burn the *kers* tree branches and sticks as firewood in any temple related rituals.

A lot of other plants are considered as indispensable in the execution of religious ceremonies in Toda culture. They consider it a sacrilege to use any other plant and whenever the particular plant is not to be found they refuse to use the alternative plants. The leaves of the plant *kokkutars* are used for making the plates on which the food is served in ritual occasions (Ramage 1998). Their religious beliefs make it imperative to sweep the floors of their temples only with materials made from the *kappuri* tree. The Toda priests are allowed to use only the produce of the plant *pulik* as a kind of soap in their baths. The choice of avful grass in the construction of their houses is mandated by their religion. The primrose plant serves as the traditional clock of the Todas and is known as the six o'clock plant (Thursten 1975). The Todas are very conscious of the uniqueness of each plant in their religious and ritual practices and they altogether forgo a religious and ritual practice in the context of the non-availability of the concerned plant instead of opting for cultural deviations and alternatives; a fact that underpins the symbiotic relationship between ecology and religion in Toda areas. Their insistence on each plant and its importance in social, religious and cultural schemes promoted for many millennia the preservation of ecology and its sustainable and ecologically harmonious utilization.

Similarly the agricultural community of Badagas has created a religious and cultural architecture that also reflects their sensitivities to nature and plants. Most of the names of the Badaga hattis (traditional villages) are named after individual plants found in the neighborhood. For example the village of *hubbathalai* located in the vicinity of aravankadu, kunnur is named after the the chinese pagoda tree whose Badaga name is

hubbathalai. The *bikka mora hatti* is named after the local tree *Bikke* , a kind of olive tree (Badagas of the Blue Mountains 2009).

Many *kootams* of Kongu Vellala Gounders possess sacred relationship with a number of crops, plants and plant parts like flowers found in the region. They worship trees, green, grains, flowers, pepper, etc. as totemic symbols. Similar to the attitude of *kootams* towards their totemic animals, the flora based *kootams* also adhere to a complex set of stipulations clothed with religious considerations in their attitude towards their totemic plants. The *pannai kootam* people consider it a sacrilege to consume the *pannai keerai*, a kind of greens even though the other Gounder segments and other caste communities take it as part of their regular food. The members of the *pannai kootam* will necessarily take a bath before entering the house after visiting the fields where *pannai keerai* is cultivated. The *venduvam kootam* people consider consumption of lady's finger sacrilegious as it is their totemic symbol. The *perungudi kootam* avoids the consumption of *varagu sooru*, a kind of rice traditionally eaten in the western areas and the *thuuran kootam* seeks to avoid *thuvaramparuppu* (Tamil word for red gram) (Krisnasamy 1983).

The Kongu Vellala Gounders like other communities in the neighborhood worship a phalanx of plants and plant parts as part and parcel of Hindu religion. Among them the most important plants are the tulsi, banyan tree, papal tree, neem tree, coconut tree, mango tree, bilva, banana, lotus, turmeric and sugarcane. The neem tree is indispensable in the religious philosophy of the rural communities in western Tamil nadu and they consider the leaves of the neem tree as important in their ethno-medical practices, especially to treat small pox (Krishnasami 1983). The leaves of the mango trees are

conspicuously used to prepare festoons in all the religious and social occasions while the fruit is offered to gods and goddesses. The tulsi plant is a highly venerated plant among them and occupies a place of pride in their religious ceremonies. All segments of the Kongu Vellala Gounders, like their counterparts in other Hindu caste communities, consider the banyan tree as a kind of *kalpavriksha* or a wish fulfilling divine tree. The sanskritised Kongu Vellalas believe that the banyan tree is the *Aswath Vriksha* and consider it the abode of Lord Shiva.(Plant Cultures 2009) The banana tree is ubiquitously present in religious and social functions and food is always served on these occasions in the leaves of bananas.

In many places the gods and goddesses of the rural Kongu Vellala Gounder areas are placed in sacred groves and open places. The traditional deities are usually found positioned under the base of a large tree of *neem*, banyan and pipal varieties. A complete symbiosis and harmony exist between ecology and theology as many ecological facets and components are worshipped as abodes and incarnations of divine beings in the traditional, indigenous community of Kongu Vellala Gounders.

Religion and Water Resources

The traditional religious beliefs of Hinduism consider water as one of the five essential elements and constituents of nature. The indigenous communities of western Tamil nadu consider water and water bodies as sacred embodiments and subsequently have developed a set of religious beliefs and practices that promote the preservation of water bodies and their sustainable consumption. The Badagas of the Blue Mountains worship the numerous wetlands spread across their region in their annual festival of

Halla Paruva (Keystone Foundation 2002). The predominantly agricultural mountain community treats these wetlands as divine embodiments. as the precious springs that are indispensable in their economic activities get the life sustaining water from these wetlands. To celebrate the *Halla Paruva* they travel to the adjoining forests and as part of their sacred rituals pour milk into the water. In this mixture they prepare their ritual meal called *paruva* with the first millets of the year's harvest like ragi, samai and thenai. The ritual meal is then distributed to all the members and consumed as sacred food. They worship their gods and invoke their blessings so that plentiful rainfall may materialize from the advent of monsoons.

The badagas believe that the emerging spring otherwise called *Huttu Neeru* is the source of their life and livelihood. Their life in the Blue Mountains for hundreds of years has taught them the ecological knowledge that the springs are to be found in localities where a special type of stone-soil sediment mixture known in their language as *sembare kal* is found. To invoke the blessings of the rain gods they usually perform a special pooja known as *May pooja*.

The neighboring pastoral community of Todas also worships the water bodies adjoining their inhabitations and considers the wetlands and springs as sacred centers and therefore developed a complex set of religious attitudes and practices. They consider it a sacrilege to cross a river or a large water body through the help of any artificial bridge. Their religious belief mandates them to cross such water bodies either by swimming or by walking. They traditionally considered the two important rivers of mukkurti-pykara and the avalanche as sacred rivers and adhered to a plethora of religious stipulations like

separate crossing paths across the river for priests and common man and avoidance of sexual intercourse before crossing the water (Chabra 2005). Among the pantheon of their divine entities *Teipakh* is assigned the responsibility of protecting the rivers, streams and springs.

The Kongu Vellala Gounders of the plains worship water in the numerous rivers, lakes, ponds and streams located in their territory. All the rivers of western districts are worshipped and the nomenclature of their daughters frequently carry the names of these rivers. Their most important water festival is *adiperukku*, that is celebrated on the eighteenth day of the Tamil month of Adi. The festival otherwise known as *Pathinettam Perukku* meaning The Flood of The Eighteenth is celebrated grandly on the banks of the rivers, streams, pond and lakes. Especially the vital rivers of the Kongu region the Kaveri, Bhavani, Amaravathi and the Noyyal will be worshipped by millions of people. The copious rainfall poured out by the South West Monsoon that sets its foot in the peninsular India towards the end of the month of May will swell these rivers and the people go to the river banks to welcome and to express their gratitude to the water gods. The month of Adi signifies the beginning of the sowing season as brought out by the tamil maxim ‘*adi pattam thedi vithai*’ meaning sow your seeds in the month of Adi. The major agricultural operations like ploughing the fields, sowing the seeds and transplanting the saplings are carried out in this auspicious month of Adi.(Natarajan 2006). The traditional beliefs of Hinduism attach feminine status to rivers and therefore there is conspicuous participation of women in the celebrations. In many areas religious

processions are carried out in which women carry earthen pots containing *mulaipari* (sproutings from nine crucial grains).

Moreover the Kongu Vellala Gounders have totemic clans which possess sacred relationship with water. The *kaari kootam* is one of the largest totemic groups in their community and it worships clouds (*kaari* in tamil means the cloud that provides rain). Similarly the *vennai kootam* derives its nomenclature from early Tamil word for water *vennai or vellam*. This kootam, found predominantly in the southern parts of the kongu region like Pollachi, Udumalpettai and the adjoining Annaimalai hills, worships water and water bodies (Natarajan 2006). The kongu vellala gounders, like other hindu communities in the region, celebrate the first day of the pongal with the bhogi festival in which their gratitude to god Indira as the provider of rain is expressed.

The Kotas regularly conduct the Rain Invocation Ceremony to invoke the blessings of the rain gods. This community of musicians plays 12 rain tunes in this rain making ceremony that include temple opening ceremony, eighteen god calling tune, god petition to god tune, god decoration tune, hunting god tune and god tunes in the temple yard. The entire ceremony is divided into various sections and tunes are composed to approach god in each activity of the ceremony.

On the auspicious day selected for the rain ceremony all the men and women of the hamlet assemble around the *Natkal* which is a holy place of the community. From there they initiate their ceremonial procession playing all the divine tunes and conducting the procession to all the sacred and important parts and places of the village and by the time the religious procession returns to the *Natkal* the musicians in the procession would have

played all the sacred tunes. The traditional belief of the Kotas is that when this ceremony is conducted invariably the gods will bring about the much needed rainfall (Krishnan 2009)

Religion and Traditional Management of Natural Resources

The Todas build their dwellings in the shape of a cave as they believe that their primary deity On lived in the beginning in a cave like residence. The half barrel structures are traditionally built with locally available materials that include reed, bamboo, clay and cow dung. The upper curved structure was thatched with dried lemon grass. The shape of the dwelling units, construction materials and choice of place of the household are all greatly influenced by religious considerations.

The cow dung-clay mixture of right proportions was used as a kind of paste on the surface of the dwellings so that harsh cold wind is prevented from hurting the people inside. The cow dung paste and the thatched roof provided full protection against the heavy downpour of both the south west and north east monsoons. The efficiency of the indigenous technology used in the construction of houses can be appreciated by the considerably warmer atmosphere prevailing inside the houses when the temperature in the mountainous habitat hovers around one or two degrees (Chabra 2005).

Similarly the Badagas always took into consideration environmental factors in deciding their settlements and individual houses. Their dwellings are always located on the leeward side of the mountains so that protection can be secured against the strong south west monsoon winds. Their houses are constructed traditionally with the help of locally available materials without harming the environment. In their settlements called

Hattis a *suthukallu* (sacred triangle shaped stone) near the bikka mare tree is a regular feature. This sacred stone and the tree is the centre of gravity as far as the religion, society, entertainment and morality in the village is concerned.

The choice of site for their traditional settlement among Badagas was also determined by another environmental factor called water resources. The presence of springs, streams and wetlands heavily influenced their decision to establish their hattis. They pay conscious attention to the sustainable, judicious management of their water resources. The hatti families are not allowed to draw water from the springs round the cloak. They can draw water only during fixed timings, and in the nights water withdrawal is banned so that the spring gets breathing time and is recharged (Keystone Foundation 2002).

They adhere to co-operative, participatory management of water resources, especially streams, whereby the responsibility to maintain the channels were apportioned democratically to individual families of the village. To avoid contamination of water earmarked for drinking and other household activities they adopt a strategy whereby the agricultural and animal husbandry related activities are carried out in the lower areas while the household activities are carried out in the upper reaches. Moreover the sources of drinking water are provided with sacred status and various taboos are practiced regarding the utilization of these sources. It is a sacrilege for women and unauthorized men including strangers to go near the *huttu neeru* or the underground spring, the usual source of drinking water.(Key stone Foundation 2002)

Similarly among the Kongu Vellala Gounders the traditional houses are constructed with materials and technologies that are harmonious with environment. While the roofs are covered with leaves of coconut and palm trees the walls are pasted with cow dung mixed with water. The frontal portion of the houses is pasted regularly with cow dung solution. That promotes the welfare of the inhabitants by killing the unwanted insects and worms. The cow dung is considered to be sacred and its burnt out ashes are even used for brushing the teeth. The rural people in western Tamil nadu avoid building their houses with entrances towards the western direction so the dry south west monsoon wind and the dust it brings can be avoided. The rain bearing south west wind loses its moisture in Kerala as it is unable to climb over the tall Western Ghats and therefore becomes a dry wind inside Tamil nadu which should be halted from hurting the members and therefore a west facing entrance is not preferred. This ecological knowledge is clothed in religious color and the people justify their avoidance of the west facing entrance by saying that west is the direction of the devils. The indigenous knowledge system of the Kongu Vellala Gounders tells them that whenever the *sani moolai* is replete with dark clouds in the month of *karthikai* rainfall is certain and the scientific depth of the indigenous beliefs can be understood and appreciated as the *sani moolai* is the north eastern direction and in the month of November the monsoon blows from the north eastern direction.

The Noyyal river and tank canal system in Coimbatore district stands as the salient example for the sound traditional management of the precious natural resources. The Noyyal River gets its nomenclature from the place where it makes its confluence

with Kaveri River. This place in Karur district has a *sellandiamman* temple which occupies a central position in the *kunnudayaa Gounder Koothu*, the folklore of the Kongu Vellala Gounders (Indianetzone 2009). The indigenous communities of kongu area built numerous tanks on both side of the river and whenever the river was in spate because of the vigorous North East Monsoon, the excess water will be diverted to these ponds. The large number of tanks in the entire length of the Noyyal River ensured not only protection from devastating, recurrent floods but also artificial recharging of the ground water in the ensuing largely dry region. The water stored in the ponds percolated down into the sub soil layers and proved vital in carrying out agriculture in the months when the monsoon winds are absent (Prasad 2005). In and around the city of Coimbatore there are large tanks like the Narasampathy tank, Krishnampathy tank, Selvampathy tank, Selvasintamani tank, Coimbatore tank, Valankulam tank, Amman kulam tank, Singanallur tank, Kurichi tank and the Vellalore tank. To take care of the maintenance of these tanks several settlements were created in the past. These tanks are provided with religious status and many temples are built on the banks of these tanks. The medieval Cholas came from the east and built the *patteeswaran* temple on the banks of the Noyyal River at Perur and that place continues to be a centre of gravity in religious and ceremonial activities. The devotees worship Lord Shiva in the temple and take a holy dip in the river to get rid of their sins.

Religion and Mountain Preservation

The Todas worship a plethora of mountains and their peaks which are called as *taihhow tehtt* in their native language. These deity peaks are considered to be sacred by all the segments and clans of Todas and some of these peaks are called *kaa(r)sh gol* and *kawnttaihh* and these peaks are worshipped as the primary abodes of their gods and goddesses and therefore no Toda will point out these peaks straightly as it is tantamount to religious sacrilege (Chabra 2006). Additionally there are a number of sacred mountain tops in their environment that are attached with varying degrees of sacredness by the different Toda clans and families.

The Irulas possess sacred and supernatural attachment with the adjacent mountains and their peaks and their most important temple dedicated to Lord Vishnu is located on the eastern slopes of the blue mountains in Rangasami Betta where the eastern and western ghats meet each other. The location of the temple has been chosen carefully so that the Irula villages and families can have a clear and direct view (Thursten 1975).

The Badagas also consider the adjacent mountains as sacred entities and their hamlets are traditionally spread around the Nakku Betta meaning in their native language four mountains(Badagas of Blue Mountain 2009). Down in the plains the Kong Vellala Gounders worship different mounts and mountains as many of their temples are located there. They worship the Palani hills as it is one of the six abodes of Lord Murugan. The Maruthamalai temple located at the eastern slopes of the Western Ghats in Coimbatore is another place of popular worship. It is common place to find numerous mounts and mountain tops with temples laboriously constructed and passionately worshipped all over the kongunadu.

Religious Folktales and Environment

The religious myths and tales of the local communities form another dimension of the innate relationship between humans and the environment and many features of the local ecology like rivers, mountains, and trees are believed to have played a Good Samaritan role in the distant past at times of distress. Therefore the local communities glorify and worship these ecological entities in their religious myths.

Among the Kotas of the Nilgiris they believe that in the beginning a black cow blessed with divine vision guided their ancestors through the thick forests of the Blue Mountains. The holy animal provided divine revelations to choose the sites for the early settlement for their ancestors. The seven pioneer villages of the Kota community were established in the places where the black cow stopped and indicated to their forefathers (Wolf 2006). The seven pioneer villages of Kotas are spread across all parts of the Nilgiris and in the order of creation they are

1. Menar in Kunda Kotagiri
2. Kolme-I in kolli malai
3. Kurgo-I in Sholur Kokal
4. Tiega-I in Trichigadi
5. Porga-I in Kotagiri
6. Kinar in Kil Kotagiri
7. Kala-c in Gudalur Kokal.

These places are considered to be very sacred in Kota community and are basically the centers of their culture, morality, spirituality and society.

The Badagas also possess a folk tale which describes their advent into the Blue Mountains and the precious assistance provided to their ancestors in critical situations by the natural forces of the local area. The pioneer family of Badagas consisted of a charming sister and seven brothers who lived in a village in the adjoining Mysore region in Karnataka. The ruler of Mysore happened to see the beautiful damsel of the Badaga family one day when he was on a royal visit to the village and became immediately infatuated with her. When he approached the brothers with a proposal to marry the girl the brothers refused as he practiced a different religion. But the ruler was very stubborn and when he threatened to forcefully marry her, the hapless Badaga family escaped in the middle of a night. The king ordered his royal army to chase the fleeing family and the frightened Badagas fled in the direction towards the Blue Mountains. They came across a swollen river at the foothills when the pursuing royal army apparently closing in. The Badaga brothers started worshipping Lord Shiva in the form of a Shiva lingam pleading for divine intervention to save them. At this moment serendipitously a path appeared in the middle of river enabling the frightened family to cross over to safety³⁸. A few moments later when the royal army came in hot pursuit and attempted to cross the river there was a instantaneous rise in the level of the river and the army met a watery grave. As the Moyal saved their ancestors the Badagas consider it a sacred protector of their community.

Like the Kotas, the Badagas also believe that their initial settlements were chosen with the help of native animal guidance. For example soon after crossing over to the

safety of the Blue Mountains the eldest brother in the Badaga family asked one of his younger brothers to follow a particular deer with instructions that whenever it stopped he should establish his settlement. The obedient brother followed the word of his elder brother and route of the deer and when the deer stopped in *kinnakorai* he decided to build his dwelling there.

The local communities like the Kongu Vellala Gounders often speak about a folktale dealing with the emergence of Bannari Amman temple near Sathyamangalam in the erosion district. In the distant past the pastoral villagers were grazing their cattle in the forests and one day one puzzling event occurred as one of the cows refused to allow the milkmaid to milk her. The recalcitrant cow refused to allow even its calf to drink milk from her. The cowherd began to watch the movements of the concerned cow the next day and he came to see the cow going to a *vengai* tree just before returning to the cowshed. And as the cow stood near the tree automatically milk began to pour down from its udder to the ground over the bushes. Puzzled, the next day he along with other villagers went to the place and removed the bushes. They were surprised to see *a swayambu lingam* and a sandhill in that place. As people stood silently one villager went into a trance and began to speak the words of Goddess revealing to the people that she had chosen to reside over there to protect the people (Subburaj 2009). The grateful villagers constructed the Bannari Amman temple in that place. In this supernatural folktale dealing with the origin of the famous temple of Bannari Amman the local flora (*vengai* tree), fauna (cow) the indigenous people are inter-connected along with the religious entity.

Religion, Folk Songs and Nature

The traditional songs of the indigenous communities that are often sung at important religious occasions are full of their concern, devotion and affection toward nature. These songs emphasize the preservation of environment, forests, water bodies and biodiversity. For example the Kurumbas of the Nilgiris sing a song that worships nature (Mokeri 2000).

Entrusted and nurtured by nature, the tree grows, hey you
Entrusted and nurtured by trees, the leaves grow, hey you
Entrusted and nurtured by leaves, the flowers grow, hey you
Entrusted and nurtured by flowers, the fruits ripe, hey you
Entrusted and nurtured by fruits the Adivasis live, hey you
And entrusted and nurtured by us the land survives, hey you

The Toda song symbolizes the symbiotic relationship between environment, settlement, religion and society in the Nilgiris (Hocking 1972)

We have sat at a place with good view

All the many hutments are seen;

All the many regions are seen.

All our-clan people are seen;

All the other-clan people are seen.

All the hamlets are seen:

All the sacred places are seen

The normal prayer song of the todas says that

” may all be well with the male children, the man, the buffalos, the female calves and everyone” (International Year of the Mountains **2002**) his brings out the relationship between people and the animal world.

The culture of Badagas is replete with songs and prayers that glorify nature and promote an attitude of affection and reverence for environment as seen in the following song which is a hymn to their *Heththe*(Indigenous People of Nilgiris 2009).

Mother Endearing
Plighted fast unto us
Precious-ever
Promises of Thee.
Come O Dodda Heththe !
Heththe of Bereghanni
Maasi is thine name
Naalku betta is thine home.
When mountains so lofty
Over us loom and Lo !
Brilliant is the bloom
Of flowers so numerous
Wreathed in silver
The smile of thee
Vaulted in the sky
The radiance of moon so benign
Golden is Thine shade
And sweet so it turns
Summers so many.
Nilgiri is thine abode
Majestic its walls all around
Bestow on us - Mighty Mother
Smother us with - boons of life
Beseech we, of thee
Blessings of Prosperity
Treasure ever, thine providence is
Measureless are offerings of thy bounty

Thy protection we behold

Thy presence we adore

The Kongu Vellalas Gounders sing a song called *Mangala Valththu* in their marriages.

This song believed to have been written by the famous poet of the medieval Chola period; Kamban describes the religious, social, ceremonial and ritual procedures that characterize the marriage function of the Kongu Vellala Gounders and it speaks of the numerous plants, fruits, flowers, grains and trees that are used in a sacred manner in different stages of the marriage (Natarajan 2006).

Conclusion

As the local communities have sacred and supernatural relationships with a wide spectrum of animals, plants, birds, grains and greens, the floral and faunal biodiversity of the neighborhood is preserved, protected and consumed in a sustainable manner. The worship of inanimate objects like mountains, rivers, peaks and various landforms preserve the non-biological dimensions of the environment. The religious beliefs and practices of the local communities are organized around the two inter-related symbiotic principles of deification and humanization of nature and naturalization of human beings. As these communities worship and attach supernatural significance to the environment in the wild and in the vicinity of their settlements both field and wild biodiversity will be preserved. Their traditional knowledge systems judiciously combine consumption needs and conservation imperatives and unfortunately this precious tradition of knowledge is under assault from the consumerist, anthropocentric modern developmental paradigm.

The modern and the post-modern world must cease from converting these ecologically harmonious communities into ecological refugees placed at the altar of the modern greed.

The religious systems must be utilized to promote fundamental changes in the crudely anthropocentric perceptions towards the environment in favour of the eco-centric world view. It is pertinent to recall the United Nations Report on Environment and Development that in 1987 acknowledged the potential role of world's religions in tackling environmental degradation related hazards. It asserted that 'sustainable development requires changes in values and attitudes towards environment and development. The world's religions could help provide direction and motivation in forming new values that would stress individual and joint responsibility towards the environment and towards nurturing harmony between humanity and environment'(UN World Commission of Environment and Development 1987)

The United Nations Declaration adopted by the General Assembly Resolution 61/295 in 2007 also emphasized the need to preserve the indigenous spiritual systems to preserve the environment. The article 25 asserted that the indigenous people have the right to maintain and strengthen their distinctive spiritual relationship with their traditionally owned or otherwise occupied and used lands, territories, waters and coastal seas and other resources and to uphold their responsibilities to future generations in this regard (United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Communities 2006)

The Rio Declaration in its principle 22 asserts that indigenous people and their communities and other local communities have a vital role in environmental management and development because of their knowledge and traditional practices and that states should recognize and duly support their identity, culture and interests and enable their

effective participation in the achievement of sustainable development (Rio Declaration on Environment and Development 1992).

The religious, spiritual and intellectual traditions of the local and indigenous communities of western Tamil nadu in South India like the Todas, Badagas, Irulas , Kotas and Kongu Vellala Gounders should be preserved so that the fragile ecological domain of western parts of the state can be protected and consumed in a sustainable manner. As they inhabit the catchment areas of major river basins of Tamilnadu the preservation of their ecologically harmonious religious customs is indispensable for survival of the fertile and populous areas of the state.

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