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When nature cries

The Todas of the Nilgiri hills and their most prized asset — the buffalo — are both struggling for survival. KEYA ACHARYA on the challenges facing the community today.



Endangered... the buffaloes of the Nilgiris.

THEY looked like a picture-postcard: village elders, exotic in their striking black and red, needle-worked traditional Toda shawls, seated in a dignified row against a backdrop of mellow, blue mountains. Romanticised through books and photographs though they may be, there is nothing picture-perfect about their plight.

The Todas of the Nilgiris are as endangered a community as their most sacred and beloved of assets, the horned, grey woolly Buffalo. While they number 1,500 in population, their buffaloes total about 1,000 today. Both are endemic to the Nilgiris and are struggling to survive.

“There is no point in government schemes for us without government attention on our buffalo,” says Theotheo Kumaresh, Treasurer of the newly-formed Pancha Pandavar Toda Buffalo Association, a group of Toda herders who have banded together with help from a Madurai-based NGO called SEVA.

SEVA is networking with traditional herders nationwide to highlight the need to include indigenous domestic cattle species into India's biodiversity conservation policies, as part of the Ministry of Environment and Forests' National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP) being co-ordinated by the NGO, Kalpavriksh. (See box).

Traditional herding cultures are inherently linked with their cattle and the NBSAP sees the mutualism in both culture and cattle for each to survive. And, quite unlike the rural-urban migration trend today, Toda youth want to stay on in their mountain villages with their buffaloes.

Uninclined towards agriculture, many have remained poor by leasing

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their lands for a pittance to agriculturalists, the majority of whom come from neighbouring Karnataka. The challenge facing both the State and the community today is in being able to garner and integrate modern benefits like higher education into their mountain lifestyle.

Considered more valuable than gold and worshipped for centuries by this gentle and simple community of pastoral herders, the buffalo finds a place in all traditional Toda rituals in marriages, births and deaths, besides being kept for milk and for company. Small wonder then, is their distress over diminishing numbers, from an average 100 head per family to between 10 to 50 head today. ``A Toda is nothing without his buffalo," says K. Vasamalli, Programme Officer, SEVA, and the community's first of four women graduates.

The most visible problem is the disappearance of traditional Toda pasture lands, acknowledged as theirs in colonial times, but which have since been taken over by the Forest Department (FD) and planted with ecologically disastrous species of eucalyptus and pine. The highly water-consumptive Eucalyptus has not only changed the microclimate of the Ooty-Kotagiri region but also spelt the end of many small medicinal shrubs and grasses that grew under the original Shola forests and helped keep the buffalo healthy, says Vasamalli. The Pine tree, alien to the Shola deciduous forests and another of the FD's ``introduced ventures", has re-ensured that nothing grows on the forest floor.

Thus hemmed into little grazing clusters of land around their *moodds*, or *mands* (hamlets), the buffalo's lack of proper grass and diet-change has played its part in the high mortality rate of calves, says Dr. M. Iyue, Director, Sheep Breeding Research Centre at Sandynalla near Ooty. Even assuming government veterinarians were willing to travel the distance, the inaccessibility of remote *mands* have made it impossible to reach in time, when all that is needed are simple antibiotics and de-worming, he says.

The surviving calves then face another danger, in the form of leopards. The elders speak with bewilderment at the changing scenario of previously unknown animals now literally at the Toda doorstep due to the introduced plantations, with the animals migrating from the neighbouring Mudumalai sanctuary. Forty-year-old Petraj of Pagalkot *mand* says he has lost 20 animals to leopards. ``First I have to roam the hills looking for the half-eaten remains, then get a veterinarian to certify the cause of death and then wait over a year for compensation from the FD. It is not worth the trouble," says Petraj.

Compensation that should be worth the trouble is the FD's Eucalyptus Toda lands reverting to the community. The harvested timber, the third since its plantation, along with the land is to be returned to the Toda by the FD, but the Eucalyptus-oil lobby is already protesting. In a rare departure from the FD's negative perceptions of local communities bordering forests, Mr. A.K. Ulaganathan, DFO (north) Nilgiris, concedes that the Todas have intimate knowledge of Shola ecology and have not damaged the forests.



The Todas... a close-knit community.

But that perception is not shared in the case of another endangered species, the ``Umbalachery'' cattle herders locked in battle with the FD in Virudhunagar District's Giant Grizzled Squirrel Sanctuary (GGSS) in Tamil Nadu.

Allowed by law to graze inside 300m of a sanctuary's borders, these herders are now frustrated at being barred from it in recent years. The Umbalachery Cattle Breeders' Association formed by SEVA cites harassment and inordinately high fines for grazing, a charge that Wildlife Warden M. Mohan denies. ``This is a sanctuary with a highly endangered animal, (Giant Squirrel) and the law allows for my discretion on grazing, depending on the ecology," he says.

Another reason for the disbarment is the FD's Rs. 500-crore Japanese loan for its Tamil Nadu Afforestation Programme (TAP), also under way at GGSS. The herders are unwilling to travel to alternate sites, having lived in this area for generations. ``We earn a little money from penning (enclosing animals into land for manuring). How will we manage elsewhere?" asks 52-year-old Govindan, Secretary of the Association.

In the ensuing tension, NBSAP's plea that biodiversity conservation also includes domestic indigenous species remains as threatened as the Toda and other herders.

Threatened

- The Konar, Naicker, Udayar of Tamil Nadu, herders of the Malaimadu cattle breed
- Konars of Tamil Nadu tending the Vembur, Meichery and Kachkatty Karuppu sheep
- Todas and Irulas of Tamil Nadu, keepers of the Toda buffalo
- Dhangar Gowli of Maharashtra and Karnataka with the Deccani sheep and Dhangar cattle breed
- Rebaris of Gujarat — Gir and Kankrej cattle breed
- Van Gujjars of Himalayas — Local Buffalo
- Rath Muslims of Rajasthan — Rathi and Sahiwal cattle breed

The writer is a journalist who specialises in developmental issues.

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