

## BOOK REVIEW

A Review of *The Toda Landscape: Explorations in Cultural Ecology*

Tarun Chhabra

New Delhi: Orient Blackswan Private Ltd., 2015.

618 pp. ISBN 978-81-250-6160-1. Price: ₹ 2500

Reviewed by Malay Kumar Rana<sup>1</sup>

*The Toda Landscape: Explorations in Cultural Ecology* is a remarkable contribution to *Toda* studies with its focal theme being their cultural ecology. The book reflects an enduring fondness of the author for the *Todas* since the nineties and his passion for the preservation of *Toda* culture and traditions.

The *Todas* are a small ethnic group that belongs to the Dravidian stock, and they live in the *Nilgiri* mountains of the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Their unique cultural traditions have attracted the attention of many anthropologists and linguists. However, the study by Tarun Chhabra is unique in that he was never a professionally trained academic, but a fulltime practising surgeon who developed a deep affection for the *Todas* and a keen interest in their life and culture. His views, therefore, emerge from a perspective that is not unduly cluttered or fashioned by existing anthropological theories and formulae; rather, he looks at them with freshness of sight and openness and offers us a refreshing perspective on their cultural ecology.

Chhabra's book is volume 79 in the Harvard Oriental Series, edited by Michael Witzel. Across thirteen chapters, the present volume primarily puts emphasis on the important aspects of the *Toda* cultural heritage that are barely touched by previous writers. He touches upon fascinating aspects such as the sacred geography of the *Todas* (chapter 8), some sacred institutions such as the conical temple at Konawsh reported to have been associated to distinct rituals (chapter 7), the *Toda* ethno-botany (chapters 11-13), etc. Chapter 10 is dedicated to the routes that the departed *Toda* spirits follow in the after world.

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The author also explores the sacred waters (chapter 9), *Toda* relationship with honey (chapter 6), the intricacies of their traditional attire and embroidery motifs (chapter 4), seasonal migration of families with buffaloes (chapter 5), the role of priests, priestly assistants, and the *Toda* dairy-temple institutions (chapter 7).

The book provides six appendices. The first two deal with the unique relationship of *Todas* with their surrounding flora and fauna. Appendix 3 contains the lists of *Toda* landscape and almanac terms. The prayers for seven important hamlets are highlighted in appendix 4 while appendix 5 discusses their food habits and lists some of their traditional festive foods. Appendix 6 presents terminology specific to their buffaloes.

In addition to the text, the book is enriched with accompanying supplements such as photographic documentations, maps, tables, figures, and charts. Thus, the book provides an in-depth exploration of the *Todas* and represents a major breakthrough in *Toda* studies. With its focus on the *Toda* cultural ecology, the book not only provides fresh insights on the *Todas*, but also meticulously reproduces in the original *Toda* language as well as with its English translation many chants that were even missed by the great *Toda* textual scholar professor Murray Emeneau. All in all, the book is an anthropological treasure not only for academicians and policy makers, but for any general reader and lover of human civilization.