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Cultural Heritage of the Badagas Community - A Study

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Abstract

The Badagas community is an indigenous tribal population of the South Indian region. They have an illustrious cultural heritage with strong traditional practices. In this particular article, the important cultural aspects of the community, such as the food habit, attire, festive culture, folk songs, dances, etc., are analyzed. In the case of the food habit, the community has traditionally adhered to the platitude of consuming simple and eco-friendly food. Similarly, the traditional attire has not only its functional value but also its values as an action. The community has strong traditional values in the form of festive culture, which has the strong potential to unite the community. Similarly, the songs and dances have the strong potential to preserve the community history.

Keywords: *Badaga community, Avarai Kulambu, traditional attire,Thuppathittu,Hethey .*

Introduction

The Badagas community lives in the Nilgiri district of Tamil Nadu and forms the largest population group in the region. There are many tribal communities living in Nilgiri like Todas, Kotas, Kurumbas, Irulas and Paniys. They reside in approximately 300 to 400 villages around Ooty. Their main occupation is agriculture. Ooty is famous for tea and coffee, and the Badagas cultivate tea and coffee plantations and export their produce to many foreign countries. They

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also grow fruits and vegetables, mainly potatoes, carrots, and other crops. The climate of Ooty is cold throughout the year, so they usually wear sweaters.

The language spoken by the community is called the Badaga language, which does not have a written script and is similar to Kannada. They also know Tamil and use it for both speaking and writing. Before independence, they were categorized as a tribal community, but after independence they were classified under the Backward Class category. There is also a theory that the Badagas migrated from Mysore, which is supported by the similarity of their language to Kannada.

The Badagas form one of the largest indigenous groups and have a rich oral tradition of folktales, songs, and poetry. They are Hindus and mainly belong to the Shaivite (Shiva) sect. And they also worship nature. They celebrate Hindu festivals such as Diwali and Pongal, though their customs and traditions differ significantly from those of other communities. During my visit to Ooty, I stayed in a Badagas village where one of my friends belongs to this community. I was amazed to see that their houses do not have gates or compound walls. Today, many Badagas have moved to towns and cities for education and employment, but even after relocation, they continue to preserve and respect their traditions.

Dress code:

The dress code followed by Badagas men and women has been different from many other communities in India and plays a significant role as a marker in their cultural identity. The traditional dress of Badagas men consists of a languti, white turban, and Seelae, which is a long body cloth with red, black, and gold stripes and is always worn on the body with one end thrown over the shoulder. People generally wear white-colored clothes, and a walking stick with a leaf-made umbrella forms part of the general traditional appearance for men.

The Badagas women traditionally wear a white cloth called Mundu to cover the body, along with an inner garment known as Thundu, which is tightly wrapped across the chest and extends down to the knees, securing them with two cloth belts called Rattus or Satte. They wear on the head a distinctive ornament called Pattu, a gold ornament in the left nostril, necklaces of small glass beads and silver links with a pendant, and armlets of silver or copper worn on top of the elbow. Each of the items that constitute dress and ornaments bears a symbolic significance and points out something related to its culture and traditional ways of life.





Cuisine:

The famous cuisine of the Badaga community is Avarai Kulambu (Avarakkai Uthaka). It is a sacred traditional dish of the Badagas and has been carefully preserved for centuries without any change in its preparation. It is made using a special variety of avarai (broad beans) cultivated by them in Ooty. Therefore, it is considered a main dish served at almost all functions and festivals in the region. The most important festival of the Badaga community is Hethai Habba. During this festival, Annadanam (free food service) is offered in temples. Their traditional meal is served, which includes rice, Avarai Kulambu, and one type of sweet. Ghee plays an important role in this meal and is generously added while eating. Another famous sweet in the Badaga community is Ennai Hittu or Thuppathittu, which resembles poori in appearance but it will be sweet. It is prepared using maida (refined wheat flour) and sugar. It is often served with tea or black coffee. This traditional sweet is made during all major functions and is also prepared as part of death rituals. In addition, they prepare a wide range of traditional Tamil Nadu foods, snacks, and sweets.



Dance:

The traditional dance of the Badaga people is known as the Badaga dance. It is an important cultural dance form of the community. During the performance, both men and women wear white traditional clothing such as mundu and thundu. It is a group dance performed in a circular formation. While dancing, they move their hands, legs, and shoulders rhythmically

and rotate in coordination with one another. This traditional dance is performed during all major functions, festivals, and even at funerals.



Song:

Badaga songs, rooted in the Nilgiri Hills, form a rich oral tradition of the community. They include various genres such as love songs, wailing songs (sung during funerals), and devotional hymns dedicated to deities, especially Hethey (Hethai Amman). These songs play an important role in preserving cultural values, emotions, and religious beliefs. Popular traditional and modern Badaga songs include Maasiyamma, Kudi Kaapa, Yegivo Hethey, and Aalamora Naalu, many of which revolve around the worship of Hethai Amman.

Devotional (Hethey / Hethai Amman): Maasiyamma, Kudi Kaapa, Yegivo Hethey, Ondhu Sinnadha Kodaya Singara, Belliya Kodaya Thooki, Hethey Hethey, Adhabandhiya Hethey.

Folk and Traditional: Betta Naaka, Aalamora Naalu, Halla Neeru, Bellae Munduna.

Modern / Romantic: Pedhuvadha Bettu (EP), Kadanaduna.

Ceremonies:

In the Badaga community, every important ceremony such as marriage, funeral, and other rituals follows certain common traditions. These include wearing white attire, performing traditional dances, and the use of umbrellas, which play a major role in their cultural practices. Even after childbirth, when a newborn is brought home, an umbrella is used, and the child is carried under it as part of the tradition. Here, the funeral and marriage ceremonies of the Badaga community are described.

Funeral Ceremony:

Their funeral ceremonies are elaborate and are treated as a collective responsibility of the entire village. Since the whole community takes part, the bereaved family receives considerable emotional support and is relieved of much of the financial burden. The funeral

ceremony differs for people who die before marriage and those who die after marriage. At the house of the deceased, the body is bathed and dressed in new clothing. A man is clothed in a white veshti or mundu, a white shirt, and a white turban. A woman, instead of a turban, has a white cloth called pattu tied around her head. The body is laid on the ground and covered with a traditional white cloth with gold thread work known as seeley for men, and a colourful cloth called banna for women. A traditional oil lamp (deepam) is lit and placed near the head. Family members sit around the body while relatives and friends arrive to pay their respects. The following morning, the body is carried to the Dhodda Mane Keri (the courtyard of the "big house," which is considered sacred) and placed on a cot known as kattilu. The cot is decorated with a cloth canopy and colourful umbrellas on all four sides and in the centre. Benches are arranged on both sides for close relatives, who sit there in mourning.

A ritual called Saavu Muttuvadhu is then performed. Visitors touch the feet of the deceased as a sign of respect if the person was elderly or a village leader. If the deceased was younger, villagers sing appropriate songs while waiting for all relatives to arrive. When the deceased is a woman, women from her parental village perform a circular dance around the cot. Around 1:00 p.m., a pooja is conducted at the foot of the cot after removing the benches. Accompanied by bhajans, the body is taken around the village three times, and finally, flower petals are sprinkled over it. After this, the cot is taken to the village common land and positioned so that the feet face east. The poles, flowers, and umbrellas are removed, leaving the body exposed to the sky. At this stage, one of the most significant funeral rituals, called Karu Harachuvadhu (the chanting of the funeral prayer), is carried out. This prayer is believed to transfer the sins of the deceased to a calf (a bull calf in the case of a male). According to tradition, even if a person has committed up to 1,300 sins, they are forgiven through this ritual, allowing the soul to reach heaven free of sin. Only men chant this prayer. An elderly man leads the ritual by naming the deceased and describing how the life that came from the womb now departs this world for the "maya" world. As he recites each sin, the gathered crowd repeats the final word, pappa (sin).

For example: **Elder: Hachchaya kiththadhu pappa Crowd: pappa**

Once this prayer is completed, the spouse is formally declared a widow or widower by removing their jewellery. Then the close family members—brothers, sons, and grandsons—perform the ritual called Akki Ethhovadhu, in which grains of rice are placed on the mouth or face of the deceased. This is done in a single line, starting from the sacred Dhodda Mane and

circling the cot three times in an anti-clockwise direction. The widow or widower is also led around in the same direction.

Immediately afterward, the body is taken to the burial ground, known as Dhoovay. After final prayers are offered, the deceased is laid to rest with due respect.In the case of cremation, the bones are collected on the second day after cremation and preserved in a new mud pot or a cloth and kept in a specified place in the burial ground. When death occurs in a family, respective villagers take responsibility of death ceremony, while the family doesn't have any burden.







Wedding Ceremony:

Badaga weddings follow unique customs and rituals, and even the traditional attire worn during the ceremony is quite different from that of other communities. Both the bride and groom wear the traditional white attire.

Sapura Nadodhu: This refers to the decorations and arrangements made at the groom's house for the wedding ceremony.

Ungaramani: It is a chain that is placed around the bride's neck from the groom's side as part of the marriage ritual.

Dhristi Kaipadhu: This ritual is performed to protect the bride and groom from the evil eye or negative influences.

Ghumba: It is a vessel filled with water. When the bride enters her in-laws' house for the first time, she carries the ghumba on her head along with two co-sisters.

Koo Saasthura: In this ritual, the bride and two co-sisters eat a mixture of hannu (banana), mosuru (buttermilk), and pathukoo (a type of rice) served on a ganguva batullu (a traditional copper plate).

Kanni Saasthura: This is the tying of the wedding knot. It includes a kanni (a yellow thread that is removed soon after the wedding) and a thaali (mangalsutra).

Hana Saasthura: In this ritual, elders present the bride and groom with one-rupee and fifty-paise coins as a symbol of sotthu (wealth and prosperity).





Festivals:

Badagas refer to festivals as "Habba." Their main deities are Hethai and Ayya. They also worship several Hindu deities, including Shiva, Krishna, Kali, Mariamman, and Muniappa. The Badagas celebrate Hethai Habba in a grand manner for about one month every year during December–January, and it is observed throughout the Nilgiri district. Some of the important festivals of the community include Devva Habba, Hethe Habba, Sakalathi Habba, and Uppattuva Habba. They also worship the Sun, nature, and their ancestors. In addition, they celebrate festivals such as Maa Kali Habba, Dedisimi Habba, Krishna Jayanthi, Vinayagar Chaturthi, Mari Habba, Murugar Habba, Ramar Habba, and Hanuman Jayanthi.

The ancient Badagas carefully observed that forest fires were sometimes caused by the strong friction of bamboo stems rubbing against each other during heavy monsoon winds. From this observation, they learned the technique of producing fire by rubbing two pieces of wood or stones together. This traditional method of fire-making is still practiced as an important ritual during the Devva festival. Fire is produced by friction using two stones or two wooden sticks. The stones used for this purpose are called "Chikkimukki Kallu" (Chikkimukki – rubbing or striking, Kallu – stone). This fire-making process is known as "Niligolu," which refers to the upright stick method.

During festivals, the Badagas follow traditional practices such as wearing white attire, performing traditional dances, and preparing special food. All the Badaga people gather near the temple to celebrate together, and annadhanam (Avarai Kulambu) is also served at the

same place. Since everyone wears white, the large gathering looks like snow has fallen from the sky and is slowly moving along the road, creating a beautiful and memorable sight.

Conclusion

The culture and traditions of the Badaga community are completely different from those of other communities. While the traditions of many communities have changed over time due to modernization, the Badagas have continued to preserve their customs with great care and respect. Their unique practices in dress, festivals, food, marriage, funeral rites, songs, and dances reflect a deep connection to their ancestors and the natural environment. Even though many Badagas have moved to towns and cities for education and employment, they still return to their villages to participate in important rituals and festivals. This strong attachment to their heritage shows their commitment to cultural identity and unity. Preserving such traditions is not only important for the community itself but also for maintaining the rich cultural diversity of India.

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