

Struggles Against Displacement: A Case Study of Nilgiri Tribes TODA

M. Abishek*

Abstract

This research explores the displacement faced by the Nilgiri tribes of southern India, examining both historical and contemporary contexts. Historically, the Nilgiri tribes, including the Todas, Kotas, and Kurumbas, have lived in the Nilgiri Hills for centuries, maintaining distinct cultural practices and agricultural traditions. However, the onset of British colonial rule in the 19th century marked the beginning of their displacement, as the British established tea plantations, appropriating tribal lands. This process of alienation intensified in the post-independence era as government policies favored plantation agriculture, urbanization, and tourism, exacerbating tribal displacement. Contemporary displacement continues to affect the Nilgiri tribes, as they face threats from commercial development, encroachment by non-tribal settlers, and conservation initiatives that restrict access to their ancestral lands. The Nilgiris are increasingly marginalized, losing control over their natural resources, and facing social and economic vulnerability. These displacements have profound socio-political implications, leading to the erosion of cultural identity, loss of traditional livelihoods, and reduced participation in local governance. The research employs a qualitative methodology, using historical analysis, field interviews with tribal leaders and community members, and ethnographic methods to understand the lived experiences of the Nilgiri tribes. The study analyzes archival materials, government reports, and contemporary narratives to trace the trajectories of displacement and its impacts over time. Key findings indicate that the Nilgiri tribes' displacement is not only a matter of land loss but also involves the breakdown of social structures and cultural practices. The displacement has led to increased dependency on state welfare programs, diminishing tribal autonomy. Furthermore, contemporary policies often neglect the voices of the tribes in decision-making, contributing to their continued marginalization. The research underscores the need for policies that prioritize tribal rights, cultural preservation, and sustainable development to address these ongoing challenges.

Keywords: Nilgiri tribes, displacement, tribal struggles, indigenous rights, land alienation

INTRODUCTION

Displacement of indigenous communities often occurs due to various socio-political and economic factors that disrupt their traditional way of life. Historically, colonization and land grabbing have been significant causes, where indigenous peoples' ancestral lands were seized for industrial development,

*Author for Correspondence

M. Abishek
E-mail: Manigdr662002@gmail.com

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Nilgiri College of Arts and Science Thaloor, Tamil Nadu, India

Received Date: July 04, 2025
Accepted Date: July 30, 2025
Published Date: August 12, 2025

Citation: M. Abishek. Struggles Against Displacement: A Case Study of Nilgiri Tribes TODA. International Journal of Rural and Regional Development. 2025; 3(2): 39–49p.

agricultural expansion, or resource extraction [1]. These communities, who rely on their land for cultural, spiritual, and economic sustenance, face the erosion of their heritage and identity when displaced. In many cases, government policies, such as national infrastructure projects (e.g., roads, dams), and the encroachment of corporate interests, further marginalize indigenous populations, leaving them without access to their resources and a stable livelihood [2]. The consequences of displacement are profound. Beyond the loss of land, indigenous peoples often experience social and cultural

upheaval, as their traditional practices and knowledge are intricately tied to the land [3]. Displacement disrupts social structures, leads to increased poverty, and creates dependency on government aid or resettlement programs that fail to address their needs adequately [4]. Moreover, it often exposes displaced communities to new forms of discrimination and exclusion in urban settings or resettlement areas, where they face barriers to education, healthcare, and employment [5]. However, there have been efforts to mitigate the impacts of displacement. Indigenous groups have organized globally, advocating for land rights, self-determination, and the recognition of their cultures and practices [6]. International frameworks like the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) aim to protect indigenous rights, ensuring that they have a say in decisions that affect their land and way of life. Additionally, legal battles and movements for land restitution continue, with some success in returning ancestral lands to indigenous communities [7]. Despite these efforts, displacement remains a significant challenge, requiring comprehensive and respectful solutions that honor indigenous sovereignty and their relationship with the land [8].

THE INDIGENOUS TRIBAL GROUPS

The Nilgiri tribal communities are indigenous groups residing in the Nilgiri Hills, located in the southern part of India, specifically in the states of Tamil Nadu and Kerala. The Nilgiris, a part of the Western Ghats, are home to several tribal groups, including the Todas, Kotas, Kurumbas, and Irulas, each with their own distinct culture, language, and traditional practices [9]. These communities have historically lived in harmony with the natural environment, relying on agriculture, hunting, and gathering for sustenance [10]. The Todas are perhaps the most well-known among these tribes, recognized for their unique pastoral lifestyle. They traditionally raise buffaloes and are known for their distinctive attire, huts (called "dodds"), and religious beliefs centered around nature worship [11]. The Kotas, who are skilled blacksmiths and artisans, have traditionally been engaged in crafting tools and other metal products. The Kurumbas and Irulas, on the other hand, are primarily hunters and gatherers, with expertise in gathering forest products and trapping small animals. Despite their long-standing cultural heritage, these tribal communities face numerous challenges due to modernization and environmental degradation. Their traditional lands are increasingly being encroached upon for agriculture, tourism, and forest conservation efforts, leading to displacement and loss of livelihood. Additionally, the rise of commercial agriculture and the introduction of non-indigenous practices have undermined their traditional skills and way of life. Access to healthcare, education, and basic amenities remains limited, and many members of these communities continue to live in poverty.

EFFORTS TO IMPROVE THE LIVES OF NILGIRI TRIBAL

Communities include government programs aimed at providing education, healthcare, and land rights, as well as initiatives for preserving their cultural heritage. However, these efforts often struggle to meet the unique needs of these communities, who face challenges in balancing their traditional practices with modern pressures. The need for sustainable development that respects the Nilgiri tribes' culture and rights is critical for their future. Displacement of indigenous and local communities can occur due to several factors, often linked to development activities and environmental policies. Here are the key causes: Development Projects: Large-scale infrastructure projects, such as dams, highways, mining, and urbanization, frequently lead to the displacement of communities. These projects often require the acquisition of land that indigenous groups or rural populations have inhabited for generations. While these projects may bring economic growth and improved infrastructure, they can displace communities, erode traditional livelihoods, and disrupt cultural practices.

Tourism

The expansion of tourism, especially in ecologically sensitive or culturally rich areas, often leads to the displacement of local populations. Tourism development can result in the construction of hotels, resorts, and other facilities on land traditionally occupied by indigenous groups. This can displace people from their homes and disrupt their access to natural resources, while transforming their cultural heritage into a commodity for tourism.

Deforestation

Industrial logging, agricultural expansion, and illegal logging contribute significantly to deforestation, which displaces communities living in forests. As forests are cleared for timber or to make way for agriculture and plantations, indigenous people who depend on forest resources for their livelihood are forced to relocate. Deforestation also threatens biodiversity, which can harm the cultural and spiritual practices tied to the land.

Conservation Laws

Conservation policies that establish protected areas and wildlife sanctuaries can sometimes result in the forced relocation of communities. While aimed at preserving biodiversity and natural habitats, these laws may restrict local people's access to forests, water sources, and agricultural lands. Often, conservation policies fail to consider the rights and needs of indigenous populations, leading to the loss of their homes and traditional practices.

These causes of displacement often intersect, with communities facing multiple pressures from development, environmental conservation, and economic interests.

- To explore the historical and contemporary struggles of Nilgiri tribes.
- To analyze the socio-cultural and economic impacts of displacement.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Nilgiri tribes, indigenous communities residing in the Nilgiri Hills of southern India, are culturally significant for their unique traditions, lifestyles, and deep connection with the land. The major tribes in this region include the Todas, Kotas, Kurumbas, and Irulas, each with distinct languages, customs, and beliefs. The Todas are perhaps the most renowned, known for their semi-nomadic pastoralism, especially their care of buffaloes. Their distinctive, conical huts, religious practices centered around nature, and vibrant oral traditions contribute to their cultural heritage. The Kotas, traditionally blacksmiths and artisans, are skilled in metalwork and crafts, which have been passed down through generations. The Kurumbas and Irulas, primarily hunters and gatherers, have extensive knowledge of the forest environment and its resources, which plays a crucial role in maintaining the ecological balance of the region. These tribes' cultural significance lies not only in their unique livelihoods but also in their spiritual connection with nature. Their traditional practices, such as sacred rituals, folklore, and music, are deeply intertwined with the landscape they inhabit. Despite facing challenges such as modernization, displacement, and loss of land, the Nilgiri tribes continue to preserve their cultural identity, making them an integral part of India's diverse indigenous heritage.

Precolonial and colonial land use policies played a crucial role in undermining tribal autonomy, particularly in India. Before British colonial rule, many indigenous tribes practiced communal land ownership, where land was collectively managed and used according to traditional customs. These communities were deeply connected to their ancestral lands, relying on agriculture, pastoralism, and forest-based resources. Tribal societies had a degree of autonomy, governing their own territories and regulating their natural resources through customary laws and practices.

However, during the colonial period, British land use policies significantly disrupted tribal autonomy. The British introduced a system of private land ownership through land revenue systems such as the Permanent Settlement of 1793, which recognized private ownership of land. This policy led to the dispossession of tribal lands, as they were not recognized as legal landowners. Tribes were forced into a system of tenancy or labor under landlords, losing control over their traditional territories. Additionally, the British imposed forest laws, such as the Indian Forest Act of 1865, which restricted tribal access to forest resources for their livelihoods. Forests, once managed by tribes for subsistence, were declared government property, leading to eviction of indigenous people from forest areas. These policies not only displaced communities but also weakened their social and economic structures, undermining their traditional ways of life and autonomy.

DISPLACEMENT AND LAND ALIENATION DURING BRITISH RULE

During British rule in India, several early instances of displacement and land alienation severely affected indigenous and rural communities. One significant example was the Permanent Settlement of 1793 in Bengal, which altered land ownership systems. Under this policy, the British fixed land revenue payments to landlords, encouraging them to exploit land resources for profit. As landlords gained control over vast tracts of land, many tribal and rural communities, who traditionally lived on and farmed these lands, were displaced. The system also promoted the commercialization of agriculture, leading to the loss of land and livelihood for indigenous people. Another early instance of displacement was the introduction of forest laws. The Indian Forest Act of 1865 and its subsequent revisions restricted tribal access to forests, where they had depended on resources for sustenance, medicine, and cultural practices. Forests were declared state property, and communities living in them were forcibly removed, disrupting their traditional way of life.

Additionally, plantation agriculture led to land alienation. In regions like Assam and the Nilgiri Hills, British colonialists and planters encroached on tribal lands to establish tea, coffee, and rubber plantations. Indigenous tribes were either evicted or coerced into working as labor on their own ancestral lands under exploitative conditions, further marginalizing them and eroding their autonomy. These early policies laid the foundation for widespread displacement and loss of indigenous land throughout British rule in India.

CAUSES OF DISPLACEMENT

Development Projects: Construction of Dams, Roads, and Other Infrastructure

The construction of dams is one of the most significant examples of displacement. Dams often require the submergence of vast areas of land, including forests, agricultural land, and villages. Communities living in these areas, who rely on their land for sustenance and cultural practices, are forced to relocate. The Narmada Valley Project and Sardar Sarovar Dam are notorious examples where thousands of families, including tribal populations, were displaced without adequate compensation or resettlement plans. The loss of land, livelihoods, and cultural heritage is a common consequence.

Similarly, the building of roads and railways often leads to encroachment on indigenous lands, fragmenting territories and disrupting traditional patterns of life. Infrastructure projects in forested or remote regions, such as those in the Western Ghats or Chhattisgarh, can expose tribes to land alienation, deforestation, and the loss of access to resources like water and timber. While these projects can bring economic benefits, they frequently fail to consider the social, cultural, and environmental costs, leading to the displacement and marginalization of indigenous communities.

Tourism Expansion: Encroachment of Tribal Lands for Resorts and Tourism Activities

The expansion of tourism has led to significant encroachment on tribal lands, often displacing indigenous communities and disrupting their traditional lifestyles. In many regions, the development of resorts, hotels, and recreational facilities for tourists is carried out on land that has been historically inhabited and managed by indigenous groups. The Nilgiri Hills, Andaman Islands, and parts of Northeast India are examples where tourism expansion has intruded upon tribal territories. As tourism activities grow, the demand for land for resorts, eco-lodges, and other infrastructure increases. Indigenous communities are often evicted from their ancestral land to make way for these developments, with little regard for their rights or needs. In areas like Kerala's Western Ghats, indigenous tribes like the Kotas and Irulas have seen their land gradually taken over by commercial tourism projects, from luxury resorts to adventure tourism spots, which limits their access to natural resources such as forests, water, and land for cultivation. While tourism promises economic growth, it often turns indigenous people into marginalized labor in their own land, working in low-wage jobs in hotels, resorts, or as guides. Furthermore, tourism-related environmental degradation, such as overuse of local resources and pollution, impacts the delicate ecosystems that tribal communities depend on. As a result, indigenous tribes lose both their land and the cultural practices that are intrinsically tied to their environment.

Environmental Conservation

The expansion of tourism has led to significant encroachment on tribal lands, often displacing indigenous communities and disrupting their traditional lifestyles. In many regions, the development of resorts, hotels, and recreational facilities for tourists is carried out on land that has been historically inhabited and managed by indigenous groups. The Nilgiri Hills, Andaman Islands, and parts of Northeast India are examples where tourism expansion has intruded upon tribal territories. As tourism activities grow, the demand for land for resorts, eco-lodges, and other infrastructure increases. Indigenous communities are often evicted from their ancestral land to make way for these developments, with little regard for their rights or needs. In areas like Kerala's Western Ghats, indigenous tribes like the Kotas and Irulas have seen their land gradually taken over by commercial tourism projects, from luxury resorts to adventure tourism spots, which limits their access to natural resources such as forests, water, and land for cultivation. While tourism promises economic growth, it often turns indigenous people into marginalized laborers in their own land, working in low-wage jobs in hotels, resorts, or as guides. Furthermore, tourism-related environmental degradation, such as overuse of local resources and pollution, impacts the delicate ecosystems that tribal communities depend on. As a result, indigenous tribes lose both their land and the cultural practices that are intrinsically tied to their environment.

Environmental conservation policies, particularly the creation of protected areas like wildlife sanctuaries, national parks, and forests, have often led to the eviction of indigenous tribes from their ancestral lands. These areas, which are designated to protect biodiversity and preserve natural habitats, frequently restrict access to natural resources that indigenous communities depend on for their livelihood and cultural practices. As a result, tribes are forced to leave their land without proper compensation or resettlement plans, leading to displacement and loss of autonomy. One of the most notable examples is the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972 and the subsequent establishment of protected areas in India. The law banned activities such as farming, hunting, and gathering forest products within these zones, areas where many tribal communities had lived for centuries. For example, tribes living in and around the Sundarbans or the Gir Forest faced eviction as part of efforts to preserve endangered species like tigers and lions, despite having coexisted with the environment sustainably for generations.

These conservation efforts often fail to recognize indigenous people's traditional knowledge of land stewardship, which has historically contributed to the ecological balance. Displacement due to conservation laws not only threatens tribal livelihoods but also leads to cultural erosion, as their connection to the land is severed. Despite being essential stewards of biodiversity, indigenous communities continue to face marginalization in the name of environmental preservation.

DEFORESTATION AND PLANTATION EXPANSION

The expansion of tourism has led to significant encroachment on tribal lands, often displacing indigenous communities and disrupting their traditional lifestyles. In many regions, the development of resorts, hotels, and recreational facilities for tourists is carried out on land that has been historically inhabited and managed by indigenous groups.

IMPACT OF DISPLACEMENT ON NILGIRI TRIBES

Loss of Livelihood: Impact on Agriculture, Pastoralism, and Forest-based Subsistence

The loss of livelihood among indigenous communities due to land displacement and environmental degradation has significantly impacted their traditional practices of agriculture, pastoralism, and forest-based subsistence. For many tribes, their land was not just a physical space but the foundation of their economy and cultural identity. With the encroachment of development projects, tourism, deforestation, and conservation policies, these communities have been deprived of their primary means of sustenance. Agriculture was the primary livelihood for many tribal groups, who practiced subsistence farming on fertile, ancestral lands. However, land alienation due to commercialization, such as the conversion of land into plantations or protected areas, has diminished their access to agricultural land. In areas like

the Nilgiris, traditional agricultural practices have been replaced by cash crops like tea and coffee, leaving indigenous farmers without the resources needed to grow food for themselves.

Pastoralism, particularly practiced by communities like the Toda's, who depend on buffalo herding, has also been severely affected. The loss of grazing land and displacement has disrupted their pastoral economy, forcing them to adapt to new, often precarious forms of income. Forest-based subsistence, where tribes relied on forest resources for food, medicine, and materials, has been greatly reduced due to deforestation and forest conservation laws. The loss of access to forests has forced many indigenous people into poverty, stripping them of their self-sufficiency and cultural practices tied to the land.

Cultural Erosion: Decline in Traditional Practices, Languages, and Rituals

Cultural erosion is a significant consequence of displacement and land alienation for indigenous communities, leading to the decline of traditional practices, languages, and rituals. As indigenous people are forced to leave their ancestral lands due to development, conservation, and industrialization, their deep-rooted cultural connections to the land are disrupted. Traditional livelihoods such as agriculture, pastoralism, and hunting are not only economic activities but also integral to their cultural identity and spiritual practices. The decline in traditional practices occurs when communities are uprooted from their land and forced to adopt new, often foreign ways of life.

Many indigenous groups, such as the Nilgiri tribes, have a rich heritage of folklore, crafts, and rituals closely tied to the land and natural resources. When these communities are displaced or marginalized, their ability to pass down these traditions to younger generations is severely affected. Similarly, the loss of language is a significant aspect of cultural erosion. Language is often the vehicle for transmitting cultural knowledge and history. As younger generations migrate to urban areas or are forced into a market economy, they may abandon their native languages in favor of mainstream languages, resulting in language death and the loss of cultural identity. Moreover, rituals and ceremonies tied to specific landscapes, seasons, or agricultural practices also fade when communities no longer have access to their sacred spaces, leading to the erosion of their spiritual and cultural heritage. This cultural loss represents a broader threat to indigenous identity and autonomy.

Socio-economic Marginalization: Challenges in Accessing Education, Healthcare, and Employment

Socio-economic marginalization of the Nilgiri tribes has led to significant challenges in accessing basic services such as education, healthcare, and employment. These tribes, including the Todas, Kotas, Kurumbas, and Irulas, have long faced barriers that hinder their integration into mainstream society, perpetuating cycles of poverty and inequality. Education remains a major challenge for Nilgiri tribes. Despite government efforts to provide schooling, many indigenous children face difficulties in attending schools due to geographical isolation, language barriers, and a lack of culturally sensitive curricula. The Nilgiri tribes speak their own languages, but these are often not used in formal education, leading to language barriers that hinder learning. Moreover, the remote locations of tribal villages mean that schools are often far away, and transportation is either inadequate or unaffordable. As a result, many children drop out early, leading to a lack of educational attainment, which severely limits their future prospects.

Healthcare access is similarly limited. Many Nilgiri tribes live in isolated, rural areas with few healthcare facilities nearby. When medical services are available, they are often under-resourced and ill-equipped to handle the specific health needs of indigenous communities. Tribal populations suffer from higher rates of malnutrition, maternal and child mortality, and preventable diseases due to a lack of access to basic healthcare services, hygiene, and sanitation. In terms of employment, Nilgiri tribes are often excluded from mainstream economic activities. Traditionally reliant on agriculture, pastoralism, and forest-based livelihoods, they now find themselves displaced and forced into low-wage, unskilled labor, often on plantations or in the informal economy. Many also struggle to find work

due to discrimination, lack of marketable skills, and limited opportunities in urban or formal sectors. This socio-economic marginalization keeps the Nilgiri tribes trapped in poverty, undermining their overall well-being and hindering their development.

Mental and Physical Well-being: Psychological Stress and Health Impacts Due to Dislocation

The displacement of Nilgiri tribes and other indigenous communities has profound mental and physical health impacts. The psychological stress experienced by these communities is often severe, as the loss of their ancestral land and way of life leads to a sense of identity crisis, helplessness, and cultural disintegration. The trauma of being uprooted from their traditional lands, which were central to their livelihood and spiritual practices, can lead to depression, anxiety, and loss of hope. The disruption of social networks, loss of traditional roles, and exposure to unfamiliar environments contribute to a decline in mental health, particularly among elders and children.

Physically, health impacts from displacement are also significant. Loss of access to nutritious food sources, such as forest products or pasture for livestock, leads to malnutrition, especially among children. Moreover, forced relocation often places tribal populations in overcrowded or poorly equipped resettlement areas, where access to clean water, sanitation, and medical services is limited. This increases susceptibility to diseases like malaria, respiratory infections, and gastrointestinal illnesses. Additionally, the stress of displacement weakens immune systems, making individuals more vulnerable to chronic conditions and other health problems. Together, the combined mental and physical toll of displacement exacerbates the vulnerability of indigenous tribes, leading to long-term health disparities and a decline in overall well-being.

TRIBAL STRUGGLES AND RESISTANCE

Grassroots Movements: Efforts by Nilgiri Tribes to Resist Displacement and Reclaim Their Rights

Grassroots movements by the Nilgiri tribes have been a significant part of the ongoing struggle to resist displacement and reclaim their rights, particularly in the Nilgiri Hills of southern India. The indigenous tribes, such as the Todas, Kotas, and Kurumbas, have faced the threat of displacement due to development projects, encroachment by non-tribal settlers, and the expansion of national parks and wildlife sanctuaries. These communities, traditionally relying on agriculture, pastoralism, and forest-based resources, have seen their livelihoods threatened by policies that fail to acknowledge their land rights.

Over the years, grassroots movements have emerged, organized by local tribal leaders, activists, and support groups, to raise awareness about these injustices. These movements emphasize the protection of traditional land rights, forest resources, and cultural heritage. They challenge government policies that disregard the welfare of indigenous communities and call for the implementation of laws such as the Forest Rights Act, which seeks to recognize the land claims of tribal people. The Nilgiri tribes have mobilized through protests, petitions, and legal action, working to ensure that their voices are heard in decision-making processes. These efforts reflect the resilience of indigenous communities in the face of displacement, aiming not only to protect their land but also to preserve their cultural identity and way of life.

GOVERNMENT POLICIES AND INTERVENTIONS

Analysis of Government Policies on Tribal Welfare and Land Rights, e.g., Forest Rights Act, 2006

The government policies on tribal welfare and land rights, particularly in the Nilgiri Hills, have been contentious and have faced criticism for inadequately addressing the needs of indigenous communities. One of the most significant policies in this regard is the Forest Rights Act (FRA) of 2006, which aims to recognize and vest forest rights in forest-dwelling tribal communities, including those in the Nilgiris. The FRA was intended to correct historical injustices by acknowledging the rights of tribal people over forest land and resources they have traditionally depended on for livelihood.

However, the implementation of the Forest Rights Act in the Nilgiris has faced numerous challenges. Despite its progressive intent, the process has been slow, and many tribal families have not been able to secure their rightful land titles due to bureaucratic hurdles, inadequate awareness, and resistance from vested interests such as forest departments and non-tribal settlers. Many Nilgiri tribes, such as the Todas and Kotas, have struggled to assert their rights over land that they have inhabited for centuries but was declared as forest or protected area by the state.

While the FRA offers a legal framework for tribal land claims, its implementation has often been piecemeal, leaving tribes in the Nilgiris vulnerable to displacement and exploitation, undermining the Act's potential to secure their livelihoods and preserve their culture.

EVALUATION OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF REHABILITATION AND RESETTLEMENT PROGRAMS

Rehabilitation and resettlement programs for tribal communities in the Nilgiris have largely been ineffective in addressing their needs and ensuring sustainable livelihoods. These programs, often implemented in response to displacement caused by development projects, conservation efforts, and infrastructure expansion, have faced significant challenges in both execution and outcome.

One major issue is the inadequate consultation with the affected communities. Many tribal groups, such as the Todas, Kotas, and Kurumbas, have a deep connection to their ancestral lands and traditional ways of life, which are not easily replicable in resettlement areas. As a result, the relocation often disrupts their cultural practices and social structures. Furthermore, the new settlements rarely offer the same access to natural resources, such as forests and water bodies, which are essential for their traditional livelihoods.

In terms of compensation, the land provided to displaced tribes is often of poor quality, limiting their ability to continue agricultural practices or engage in forest-based livelihoods. Additionally, the lack of adequate vocational training, education, and healthcare in resettlement areas has hindered the long-term success of these programs.

Overall, while rehabilitation and resettlement programs are intended to provide a solution for displaced communities, their failure to address the complex social, cultural, and economic needs of Nilgiri tribes has made them largely ineffective in ensuring the well-being and sustainable development of these communities.

CASE STUDY

The Struggles Specific to the Toda Tribe, One of the Prominent Nilgiri Tribes

The Toda tribe, one of the most prominent indigenous communities in the Nilgiri Hills of southern India, has long faced significant struggles, particularly related to land rights, displacement, and the erosion of cultural practices. The Todas, known for their distinct identity, rich traditions, and pastoral lifestyle, have been deeply affected by modern development policies and environmental conservation initiatives in the region. Their struggles are unique but interconnected, as they deal with the loss of ancestral land, diminishing livelihoods, and the decline of their cultural heritage.

Land Rights and Displacement

Traditionally, the Toda people were pastoralists, relying on the grazing of their sacred buffaloes in the alpine meadows known as “todoos.” These meadows, located on the hills of the Nilgiris, were vital for their agricultural and pastoral activities. However, with the establishment of the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve and the creation of protected forests in the region, the Toda people have been increasingly displaced from their ancestral lands. The Indian government’s policies of forest conservation, though well-intentioned, have led to the designation of large areas once inhabited by the Todas as protected areas, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s.

The imposition of these restrictions, without adequate consultation or consideration for the needs of the indigenous communities, has led to the eviction of the Toda tribe from their land. The Toda community, historically dependent on access to these meadows for grazing and pastoral practices, has seen their way of life disrupted. As the government continues to prioritize conservation and the expansion of protected areas, the Todas are forced to navigate the challenge of securing land rights.

Despite the enactment of laws such as the Forest Rights Act (FRA) of 2006, which aims to protect the rights of forest-dwelling tribes over their traditional lands, the implementation has been slow and ineffective in the Nilgiris. The Toda tribe, like other indigenous communities, has struggled to secure legal recognition of their land rights. Bureaucratic hurdles, lack of awareness, and resistance from forest authorities and other stakeholders have made it difficult for the Todas to claim their ancestral lands.

Cultural Erosion

Beyond land rights, the Toda tribe also faces the risk of losing its cultural identity. The Toda way of life is deeply tied to their land, pastoral activities, and religious practices, particularly the worship of sacred buffaloes and their traditional temple rituals. However, modernization, urbanization, and increasing economic pressures are gradually eroding the traditional knowledge and practices passed down through generations.

The younger generation of Todas, like many indigenous groups, has increasingly migrated to urban areas for education and employment, leading to a weakening of their connection to their traditional culture. As a result, the knowledge of pastoral care, temple rituals, and the Toda language is being lost. The Todas also face the challenge of adapting to new forms of livelihood as their traditional pastoralism is no longer viable due to land restrictions and the loss of grazing areas.

Economic Struggles

The Toda economy has traditionally been centered on pastoralism, with the tribe's sacred buffaloes playing a crucial role in both their livelihood and religious practices. The decline of grazing land due to conservation policies, coupled with limited access to fertile land for farming, has forced the Toda people to shift to other forms of employment, often in the low-paying service or agricultural sectors. This has led to economic struggles, as their traditional occupation is no longer feasible in the changing landscape of the Nilgiris.

Additionally, the loss of their natural resources has hindered the Toda's ability to maintain self-sufficiency. The Toda people, traditionally known for their weaving, also face challenges in maintaining this craft due to the lack of access to traditional materials and the growing influence of outside markets.

Government and Legal Challenges

Despite legal frameworks designed to protect indigenous rights, such as the Forest Rights Act (FRA), the Toda tribe continues to face legal and bureaucratic obstacles in reclaiming their land. The FRA, which was intended to provide forest-dwelling tribes with recognition and rights over their traditional lands, has been poorly implemented in the Nilgiris. The Toda tribe's claims under the FRA have been slow to be processed, and many have not been recognized due to conflicting land use policies and the dominance of conservation and development agendas.

In many cases, the Toda people's land claims have been overlooked in favor of national parks, wildlife sanctuaries, and development projects. Despite a legal framework that promises to protect their rights, the community continues to be excluded from decision-making processes that directly impact their land and culture.

The Impact of Modern Land Use Changes on Toda Sacred Sites and Livelihoods

Modern land use changes have had a profound impact on the Toda tribe's sacred sites and traditional livelihoods in the Nilgiris. The Toda people have historically relied on their ancestral lands, particularly

the alpine meadows known as "todoos," for pastoralism, where they graze their sacred buffaloes. These meadows are not just agricultural spaces but also hold significant cultural and religious value, as many of the Toda's sacred sites, including temples and burial grounds, are located within these areas.

However, modern land use changes, primarily driven by conservation policies and the expansion of national parks, have led to the designation of large areas of Toda land as protected forests or wildlife reserves. This has resulted in the restriction of access to traditional grazing lands, displacing the Todas from their sacred sites. The loss of these lands has disrupted their pastoral lifestyle and religious practices, as their buffaloes are no longer able to graze in these traditional spaces.

Additionally, urbanization, agricultural expansion, and tourism have further encroached on Toda lands, leading to fragmentation of sacred sites and loss of cultural heritage. The decline of their traditional economy, based on buffalo rearing and weaving, has made it difficult for the Toda people to sustain their livelihoods, pushing them toward alternative and often less sustainable sources of income. The result is a deepening erosion of both their cultural identity and economic stability.

HIGHLIGHT TODA INITIATIVES FOR CULTURAL PRESERVATION AND ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

The Toda tribe has undertaken several initiatives to preserve their cultural heritage and promote environmental sustainability in the face of modern challenges. Recognizing the importance of their unique traditions and sacred practices, the Toda people are actively working to safeguard their cultural identity, which is deeply intertwined with their ancestral land and pastoral lifestyle.

Culturally, the Toda have worked to preserve their distinctive rituals, particularly those associated with buffalo rearing, temple practices, and weaving. Efforts are being made to pass down traditional knowledge through oral histories and community-based education, especially to younger generations. Local elders, known as tamilis, play a crucial role in transmitting their cultural practices, while some Toda women have revitalized the weaving of their traditional shawls (pithu), ensuring that these skills are not lost.

On the environmental front, the Toda tribe has long been stewards of their land, practicing sustainable grazing and crop cultivation. In response to the loss of their grazing meadows, the Toda have sought to restore and protect their natural resources. They are involved in advocacy for the recognition of their land rights under the Forest Rights Act, aiming to secure their access to traditional lands and ensure sustainable management of local ecosystems. Through these initiatives, the Toda tribe continues to blend cultural preservation with environmental sustainability, striving to safeguard both their heritage and the land they depend on.

CONCLUSION

The displacement of tribes in the Nilgiri region, such as the Toda, Kotha, Kurumba, and other indigenous communities, has profound and lasting effects on their socio-cultural and economic well-being. These tribes, who have lived in harmony with the environment for centuries, rely on their land for cultural practices, social structures, and economic activities. Displacement, whether due to development projects, urbanization, or environmental changes, threatens not only their physical survival but also the very fabric of their identity, traditions, and livelihoods.

Culturally, the Nilgiri tribes are deeply rooted in their ancestral land. Their rituals, languages, arts, and social norms are inseparable from the natural environment that sustains them. Displacement often disrupts this connection, leading to the erosion of cultural heritage, loss of traditional knowledge, and diminished community cohesion. Younger generations, without access to traditional knowledge systems, face the risk of cultural alienation, resulting in the gradual extinction of valuable indigenous practices and beliefs.

Economically, these tribes rely on traditional livelihood practices such as pastoralism, agriculture, and handicrafts. Displacement forces them to abandon these self-sustaining activities, pushing them into poverty or dependence on external aid. The loss of access to land and natural resources disrupts food security, economic independence, and overall community stability. Furthermore, as marginalized communities, Nilgiri tribes often lack the necessary resources and opportunities to integrate into mainstream economies, resulting in continued economic vulnerability.

To address these challenges, it is crucial to adopt sustainable and inclusive development strategies that prioritize the needs and rights of Nilgiri tribes. Development policies must recognize the importance of preserving both the cultural heritage and the economic independence of these communities. This includes securing land rights, providing access to education and healthcare, and promoting eco-friendly and culturally sensitive economic activities, such as sustainable tourism or handicraft industries that align with traditional knowledge. Additionally, active participation of tribal leaders in decision-making processes related to land, resources, and development is essential to ensure that their voices are heard and respected.

Ultimately, ensuring the socio-cultural and economic well-being of Nilgiri tribes requires a holistic approach that balances development with the preservation of their unique heritage. By respecting their rights, integrating their perspectives into development frameworks, and promoting inclusive economic opportunities, we can help safeguard the future of the Nilgiri tribes in a rapidly changing world.

REFERENCES

1. Baviskar A. *In the Belly of the River: Tribal Conflicts Over Development in India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press; 2004.
2. Thapar R. *The Past and the Present: How to Study Indian History*. New Delhi: National Book Trust; 2011.
3. Sen A. *Development as Freedom*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press; 1999.
4. Baviskar A. Tribal conflict in development: a case study from India. *Econ Polit Wkly*. 1995;30(17):1021–7.
5. Sharma K. Displacement, resistance, and tribal identity: the struggle of Adivasis against development in India. *Econ Polit Wkly*. 2018;53(22):41–9.
6. Gupta H, Desai M. State, markets, and Adivasi displacement: case studies of forest-based tribes in India. *J Dev Stud*. 2020;56(10):1754–73.
7. Fernandes W. Development-induced displacement in India: state and the tribal experience. *Indian Soc Sci Rev*. 2007;9(1):41–66.
8. Negi DP, Azeez EP. Impacts of development-induced displacement on the tribal communities of India: an integrative review. *Asia Pac Soc Sci Rev*. 2022;22(2):51–60.
9. Varughese R. Development-induced dispossession: Adivasi existence in the milieu of contemporary Indian texts in translation. *Humanit Soc Sci Commun*. 2024;11(1):1–15.
10. Dash B. Development induced displacement and marginalisation: understanding the Indian experience. *Sampratyaya*. 2024;1(2):58-70. doi:10.21276/smppt.202412.12.a5.
11. Tripathy SN. Indigenous displacement in India: a tragic tale of uprooted lives and the battle for Hasdeo's heart. *Soc Cult Dev India*. 2024;4(1):169-83. doi:10.47509/SCDI.2024.v04i01.11.