

Tribal People of the Nilgiris

The Nilgiris are the home of several tribal peoples who have lived in the area for millennia.

Historically, the Todas bred buffaloes that supplied the milk, the Kotas were potters, ironsmiths and carpenters, Kurumbas used their supernatural powers to influence or predict events, Irulas were herbal doctors and the Paniyas were slaves and bonded labourers. The Badagas were related to the Lingayats of Karnataka and brought the science of agriculture to the hills.

Each tribe performed its exclusive role in the barter economy, but did not mix socially or allow inter-tribal marriage. Many scholars have speculated that this was how the Indian caste system could have developed.

In the twenty-first century, alcoholism is rampant among the tribal people, and their population is dwindling. Their ancient inter-tribal barter system has completely broken down.

With the exception of the Badagas who are educated and relatively prosperous, the tribal people do not benefit from good education and have largely been dispossessed of their land. Conversion to Christianity has resulted in many of the tribals giving up their ancient customs and they have become objects of curiosity for tourists who visit their hamlets and buy tribal handicrafts such as shawls and jewellery.

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