

# TODA ARCHITECTURE

## A Study Trip to the Nilgiris



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This study is done as part of the Proposed Nilgiri Biosphere Park Project at Anaikatty by the Coimbatore Zoological Park Society and not to be referred or quoted for any other purpose.

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## Introduction

While Dravidians dominate the south and dictate urban culture, tribal communities still inhabit some hills and jungles. In the Nilgiri hills of northwest Tamil Nadu live the Toda, and other smaller tribal groups survive in the dense rainforest of the Western Ghats. Toda's are most interesting and least numerous, tribal people of Tamil Nadu.

## Settlement

Thought to be descendants of early wave of Dravidian People, they live in small, loose settlements called ***mund***, merged in the natural rolling meadows and shola forests of the Nilgiris. Until recently they supported themselves on dairy products from their herds of buffalo. Now they have turned to agriculture. Their traditional mode of life required an annual migration to established hot weather hamlets to provide their buffalo with new pasture. Old customs are weakening and only two of these summer settlements are still used.

## People

A striking people, the women dress their hair in long ringlets on either side of their face and both sexes wear a white cotton robe crossed by broad red bands surrounded by dense black geometric embroidery. Today such clothes are mostly

ceremonial and women use the traditional motifs commercially to decorate mats, tablecloths, tray cloths, shawls, muffler and dupettas.

### Toda Hamlet (*Mund*)

Every *mund* consists of a dairy temple, a buffalo *hundi*, a shed to shelter calves with a cluster of buildings on one side. The simple site planning ensures well drained landscape while each part is delineated with a sense of enclosure and security within the slopes by the use of simple retaining structures, grading and planting.

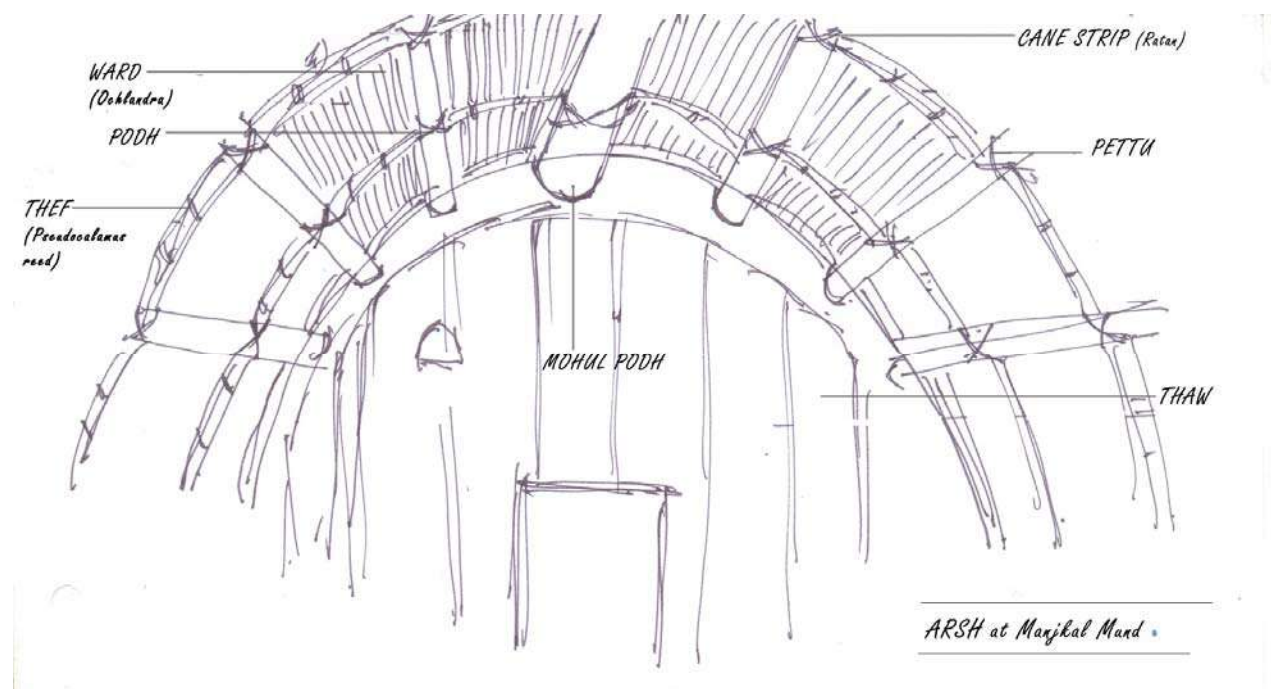
### Toda Hut (*Arsh*)

The *arsh* is quite unlike other tribal huts, its form oddly reminiscent of Chaitya arch of Mauryan times. Shaped like a half cylinder it is constructed of wooden planks, bamboo, reeds and grass. Either end is walled by planks (*Thaw*) set vertically. The entrance is through a rectangular opening some  $2\frac{1}{2}$  feet high by 2 feet wide in one end wall, made small to keep out the cold and damp in these high hills. On each side of the doorway is a raised platform, equivalent to a verandah or thinna (built – in seat), a semi private area where people sit and talk.

At, either end of an *arsh*, two arch-shaped frames are made of long bunches of bamboo splits, lashed together by a spiral of cane or bamboo splits called *Thef*. These two support *Podh*, which are strong poles, often eleven in number, running

the length of the building. At one foot intervals a hoop of *thef* (bamboo-split bunches) is lashed over the poles forming a ribcage. On this framework, courses of sticks (*ward*) are tied horizontally forming the laths to which rows of thatch (*awul*) are lashed, giving the surface a ridged effect. To give a grand look to the façade, the *thef* in front is covered with a cylindrical bunch of hay (*Podar Tidth*).

The interior, windowless and dark, consists of a single space. A raised earthen platform takes up much of one side to serve as a sitting and sleeping place. The hearth is the focus of the end farthest from the door. The kitchen, which continuously smokes the hut, is the key to its sustenance from weather and termites.







*Toda Hut at the Manjkal Mund (near the Botanical Garden)*



*Entry to the hut with seats on both sides*





*Interior of the hut*



*View of the roof construction*





*Toda Huts at Thalpatheri Mund*



*View of the Hut's facade*



*Interior of the Hut*



*View of the roof construction*

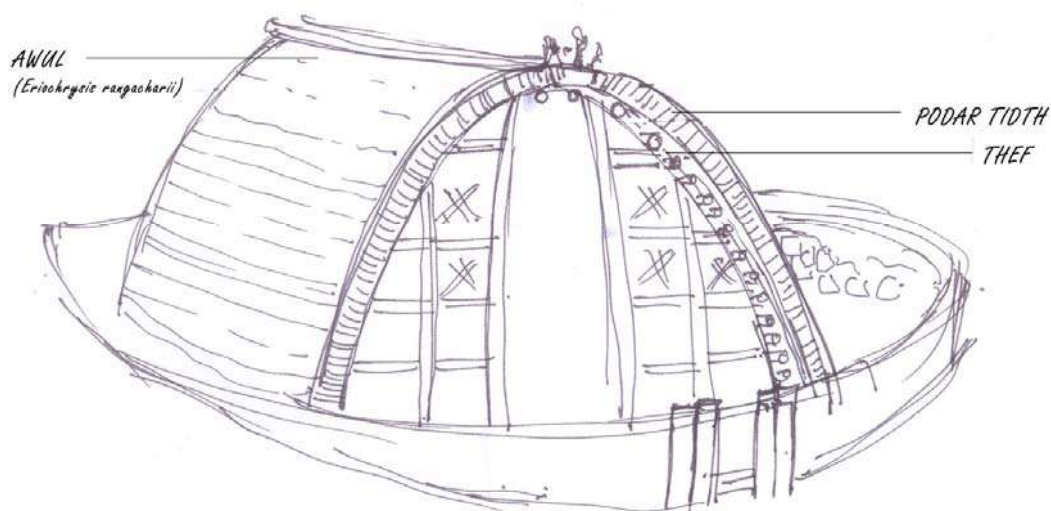


## The Dairy Temple (*Palivarsh*)

The dairy temple called as *Palivarsh*, is modeled on an *arsh* (Toda Hut) and also serves as a priest's dwelling. Only the high priest is allowed to get into the temple and its premises, which is usually sunken from the ground level, sides of this space built with random rubble packing. The entry is marked with two vertical stone pillars, which is the only way to the sunken space.

Unlike the huts, the materials and techniques used for the temple are strictly irreplaceable and for this reason even the grass and reeds used for its construction are specific species from different parts of Nilgiri Biosphere. The wooden façade is replaced by a stone façade with sacred motifs in the case of the temple.

PALIVARSH at Manjikal Mand





*Toda dairy temple at the Manjikal Mund (near the Botanical Garden)*



*Toda dairy temple facade*





*Toda dairy temple at the Thalpatheri Mund*







*Toda dairy temple at the Muthunadu Mund*



*The stone pole with the dairy temple in the background*



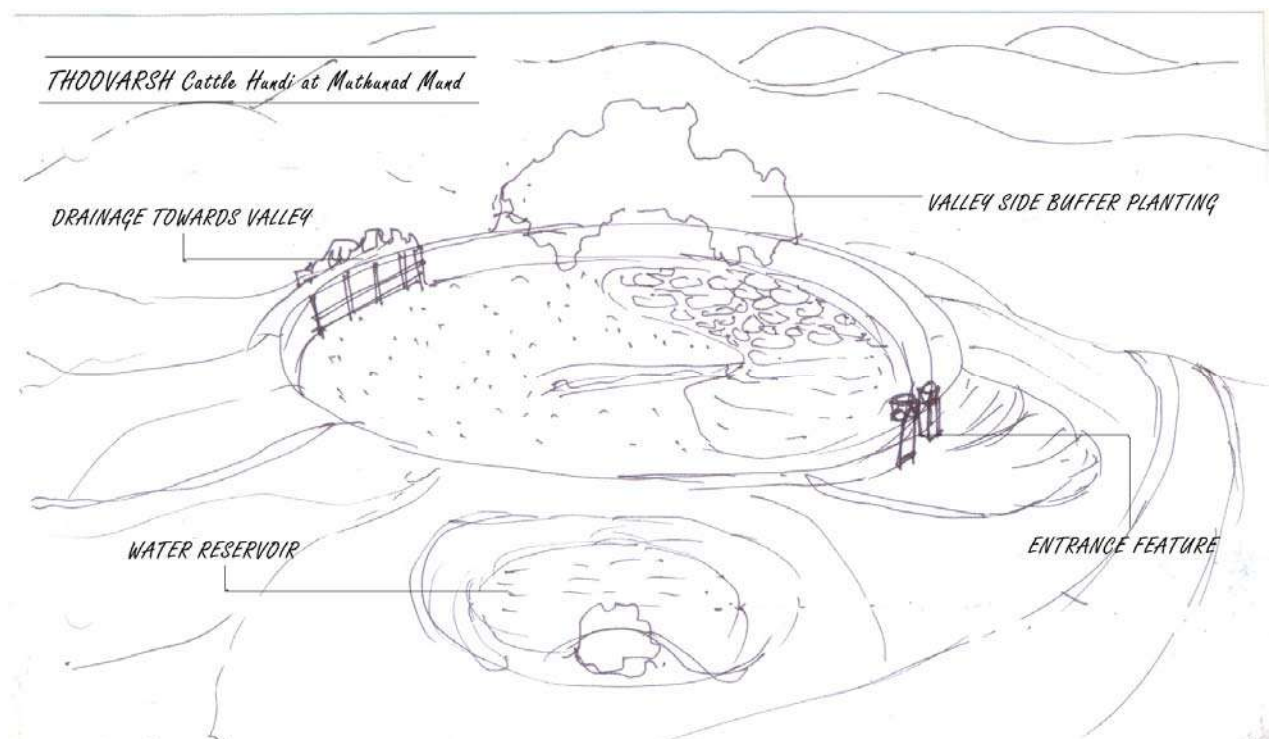
Traditional temples, constructed as thatched cones called as *Povarsh* are seen in only two *munds*, which have the regional significance among the Todas.



*Conical Dairy Temple (Povarsh) at Muthunadu Mund*

## The Cattle Hundi (*Thoovarsh*)

Cattle hundi (*Thoovarsh*) is the central livelihood element of the community. This is the place where the buffaloes herd will be kept after the grazing hours of the day. This is essentially a circular large open space, often kept along the slopes, where the steep edges are cleverly landscaped with large bushes to make it look secure. On the upper part of the hundi is a water tank, scooped out of the slope and the far end will be a drainage slit opening to the valley. Like in the temple, the entire space is sunken from the slope to make a comfortable leveled ground for the buffaloes and marked with two vertical stone posts for its entry. A separate small shed (*Kodarsh*) is provided for the calves of the herd.







*Toda cattle hundi at the Manjkal Mund*



*Toda dairy temple, cattle hundi and calf hut at the Thalpatheri Mund*





*Cattle hundi at the Muthunadu Mund*



*Calf hut at the Muthunadu Mund*





*Buffaloes grazing near Muthunadu Mund*

The study trip to the Nilgiris and to the Toda Hamlets was an incredible experience. Like the Toda Architecture, the community was also found to be unbelievably original and continuing the tradition of the community while living in the ever-growing tourism destination of Ootacamund (Ooty).

#### References:

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