

Toda Embroidery: A Timeless Tribal Craft

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ABSTRACT

The Todas are a small but well-documented indigenous community of former buffalo pastoralists, residing in the northwestern region of Tamil Nadu's Nilgiri Mountains in South India. For generations, Toda women have maintained a long tradition of embroidering clothing items, particularly cloaks and loinclothes, which are used within the community and serve as important exchange items with neighbouring indigenous groups. Over the past century, this craft has expanded significantly, evolving into a major source of income for many Toda women and their households. In the last fifty years, Toda embroidery, a practice traditionally exclusive to the women of the community, has gained increasing recognition from textile and design specialists, becoming an integral part of India's rapidly growing fashion industry.

INTRODUCTION

Clothing is one of the three essential needs of humanity, alongside food and shelter. It serves not only as protection, modesty, and decoration but also as a means of artistic expression. Embroidery is one of the oldest techniques that has been practiced since ancient times, contributing to the fame of Indian textiles for over two

thousand years. Hand embroidery in India has preserved many artistic traditions that might have otherwise faded away over time. Embroidery can be categorized into folk, tribal, and court styles. Among all embroidery forms, Tribal embroidery stands out as a distinctive style, practiced by women from various pastoral tribes. Tribal embroidery is

characterized by vibrant colours and simple motifs, often created freehand, without any markings or the need for perfect symmetry (Parthasarathy, 2005). These embroidered items are made for personal use rather than commercial purposes, and the style is typically confined to the tribes' own communities. One notable tribe is the Toda, a prominent group from the Nilgiris (Blue Mountains), which are part of the Western Ghats spanning Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Kerala in South India. The traditional costume of the Todas consists of a long piece of thick white cloth, woven with black and red stripes at the ends, which are adorned with intricate and decorative embroidery. Toda embroidery, a hereditary craft, is recognized for its geometric designs and fine workmanship. Though it is embroidered on off-white cotton fabric with red and black woolen threads, it closely resembles woven cloth (Walke, 2012).

History: The Toda tribe is renowned for its distinctive embroidered shawls, which hold deep cultural, traditional, and ritualistic significance in their lives. This unique form of embroidery, known locally as '*Pugur*' or '*Pukhoor*,' is an integral part of their heritage and daily existence. The women of Toda community are highly skilled in this intricate art, creating aesthetically rich and complex patterns that reflect the community's cultural uniqueness. This embroidery is characterized by geometric motifs and beautifully finished appearance, often resembling woven fabric. The embroidery is executed using a meticulous counting technique, requiring immense patience and dedication to achieve an exquisite piece. Remarkably, Toda women execute these intricate designs without tracing patterns or referring to guides, demonstrating their exceptional expertise (Sharma and Bhagat, 2018). The embroidered shawl, known as '*Poothukuli*,' plays a significant role in various ceremonies and life events. A newly embroidered shawl is particularly valued for

weddings, where its motifs symbolize prosperity, fertility, and security. During funerals, a specially embroidered shawl called "*Pekhadaar Poothukuli*" is used, signifying respect for the departed. Additionally, guests at weddings often wear '*Poothukuli*' embroidered fabrics as a mark of tradition and honour (Chattopadhyaya, 1977).

Traditionally, this art was practiced by the women of the tribal community as a social activity, where they would gather in a communal space to embroider and engage in conversation. This craft has been passed down through generations, ensuring its continuity within the community. Over the time, Toda embroidery has evolved beyond shawls and is now featured in drapes, dupattas, pillowcases, bags, purses, kurtis, and jackets. This rich tradition has withstood the test of time, thriving for over a century, with its legacy carried forward from mother to daughter, ensuring its preservation for future generations. The unique embroidery art was granted the Geographical Indication (GI) tag in 2013 (Sharma and Bhagat, 2018).

Technique of Embroidery: The traditional Toda embroidery technique involves counting the threads on the coarsely woven base fabric. Only the darning stitch is used for this embroidery. A Toda woman begins by working from the backside of the cloth, stitching small sections with the needle, then turning the fabric around and stitching back. At each turn, a loop is left, creating a thick line that adds a rich texture to the border. Rather than using an embroidery frame, the women rely on their fingers to stretch the fabric, allowing them to clearly see, count, and pick the threads. The designs emerge by following the warp and weft threads of the fabric, resulting in geometric patterns that closely resemble woven designs. The unique feature of this embroidery, which sets it apart from modern techniques, is that it is reversible,

allowing both sides of the fabric to be used (Baby and Paul, 2017).

Raw material used: The primary raw materials used in Toda embroidery include handwoven, unbleached, matted, and loosely woven cotton fabric, along with needles and two-ply woolen embroidery threads. The base fabric for Toda embroidery is typically light cream or white, providing a neutral background for the intricate designs. The woolen threads used in the embroidery are primarily red, black, and occasionally blue. Traditionally, the patterns were created using only red and black threads. Each colour carries symbolic meaning within the Toda culture: the White base represents purity and innocence, Red symbolizes adolescence and youth, and Black signifies maturity (Chattopadhyaya, 1977).



Figure 1: Colours used in Toda embroidery

Motifs and designs used: The embroidery is primarily based on geometric patterns, and many of the motifs are named in the Toda language. For example, the word "Puhur" in Toda means "flower," reflecting the importance of floral patterns in their designs. The Toda people's traditional lifestyle is deeply connected to the natural world, and as a result, their motifs and patterns are heavily influenced by nature. For instance, the mountains of the Nilgiris inspired the 'twehhdr' design, while the squirrel's stripes contributed to the 'peshk' pattern. The 'kopaan' design, characterized by a diamond-shaped chequered pattern, is inspired by the butterfly, and the beehive served as the inspiration for the 'Kwudrkorr' design. Yellow marsh flowers influenced the creation of the 'modhery' pattern. Various elements from

nature, such as peacocks, feathers, buffalo horns, rabbit ears, wildflowers, and celestial bodies like the sun, moon, and stars, are all reflected in the designs, which also play a crucial role in guiding the timing of the Todas' intricate rituals. The motifs are inspired by nature, daily life, mythological stories, and the vibrant flora and fauna of the Nilgiris (Parthasarathy, 2005).



Figure 2: Motifs of Toda Embroidery

Revival of Toda embroidery

With the grant of Geographical Indication (GI) tag by the Government of India. Toda embroidery has gained significant recognition and appreciation. As one of the most ancient and rare art forms, it continues to captivate people with its unique heritage. Over time, the craft has evolved and found its way into contemporary designs, such as bags and jackets, reaching markets outside Tamil Nadu. With the rise of the "slow fashion" movement, Toda embroidery is gaining further visibility, drawing the attention of designers who value traditional, hand-crafted artistry (Baby and Kavitha, 2018).



Figure 3: Revival of Toda embroidery

CONCLUSION:

Toda embroidery stands as a remarkable reflection of the cultural richness, craftsmanship, and resilience of the Toda community. Rooted deeply in tradition and symbolism, this art form reflects not only aesthetic beauty but also the social and spiritual values of its people. Once limited to ceremonial shawls and community exchanges, Toda embroidery has now overcome its original boundaries to become a celebrated part of India's textile heritage and fashion industry. The intricate, reversible designs, created without templates or guides, showcase the exceptional skill and artistic intuition of Toda women. With the grant of the Geographical Indication (GI) tag and growing interest in sustainable, handcrafted fashion, Toda embroidery is experiencing a revival, offering both cultural preservation and economic empowerment to its artisans. As it continues to evolve and adapt to contemporary trends while staying true to its roots, Toda embroidery not only enriches the fashion world but also ensures that this age-old tradition thrives for generations to come.

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