



# PUKHOOOR

THE ART OF TODA EMBROIDERY

Craft documentation

**Pukhoor - The art of Toda embroidery**

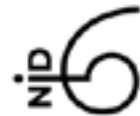
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A copy of this book is available in Tribal Research Centre,  
Ooty, Tamil Nadu

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# PUKHOOR

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# CONTENTS

07

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

13

INTRODUCTION

64

THE CRAFT

170

MARKET

185

AWARDS AND RECOGNITIONS

09

SYNOPSIS

14

THE PLACE

102

THE PRODUCT

178

GOVERNMENT POLICIES

187

MY EXPERIENCE

11

FIELDWORK METHODOLOGY

26

THE PEOPLE

150

ARTISAN PROFILE

182

PRESENT DAY SCENARIO

189

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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I would also like to thank **Mr Udayakumar** - Director - Tribal Research Centre TRC Ooty for giving me permission to work with the Toda community to construct this document. I was given a warm welcome by the team of **Ms.Harini**, **Ms.Anandi**, **Ms.Kausalya** who answered our queries patiently.

I was asked to visit the Tribal Research Museum which is close to TRC and there I saw the entire history and culture of all the tribal communities of this area through an online presentation and a collection of articles, costumes and many things from the past which gave me fair idea of the history of these tribes and their culture.

At the TRC Museum I was introduced to **Ms. Jhansi**, who was to be my guide and mentor during our stay at Ooty. Tribal settlements are very protected and cannot be visited unless we have an accompanying Toda tribal member. The presence of Ms. Jhansi gave me access to see the different settlements and learn about their lifestyle.

Meeting **Mr Ravichandran** who is a Research Associate at the Library was an enlightening experience and I was amazed at the speed with which he gave me reference material as per my requests. I was able to collect a lot of material with the promise to ask for more if required later. Very grateful for his help.

I also met **Mr Mathimaran** who works with the Press Trust of India. He has lived with the tribal communities of Nilgiris for very long time and done a lot of research on them. He has been awarded for his extensive research by Sri Abdul Kaalam. He has helped me with some of his rare photographs of the tribes. Very grateful to him for these pictures and his enlightening talk on his experiences during my visit to his house.



## SYNOPSIS

“Pukhoor - The Toda Embroidery Craft” serves as a comprehensive handbook on the Toda tribe and its unique embroidery tradition. The guide explores the tribe’s location, culture, and people, providing in-depth insights into the evolution of Toda embroidery over time. It offers a detailed understanding of the craft’s intricacies, covering materials, motifs, and the lives of the artisans. Additionally, it sheds light on the challenges they face in preserving and practicing this traditional craft.

# FIELDWORK METHODOLOGY

The following methodology was used to achieve the objectives of the study:

Area of study: According to the review of the literature, there are about 67 Toda settlements settled in the Nilgiri District. The study was limited to settlement residing in and around Ootacamund town of Nilgiris district from 17th July 2023 to 21st July 2023.

Sample selection: The sample included Toda women who have been practicing this embroidery for at least 8-10 years and from the age range of 25-75 years and few researchers who have studied and lived in Nilgiris for most of their lives.

Data collection: The primary archival material on traditions of Toda embroidery, technique, raw material, color, design, and motifs was obtained through the literary material from museum and field study. The data was sourced from museums, books, and people associated with this tribal craft.

Data Analysis: A detailed content analysis was considered the most useful tool for the understanding of responses. The data was analyzed qualitatively with the help of the information collected, and it was completed with photographs and diagrams.



## INTRODUCTION

Toda embroidery is a traditional craft practiced by the Toda tribe, an indigenous community residing in the Nilgiri Hills of Southern India. This unique form of embroidery holds deep cultural significance and reflects the rich heritage of the Toda people. The artistry involved in Toda embroidery is not merely a creative expression but also a symbolic representation of their identity, customs, and beliefs.

The embroidery typically features intricate geometric patterns and motifs, showcasing a remarkable blend of precision and aesthetics. Each piece of Toda embroidery narrates a story, often capturing the essence of their natural surroundings, mythology, or daily life. The craft has evolved over generations, adapting to changing times while preserving its cultural roots.

This study aims to delve into the world of Toda embroidery, exploring its historical context, artistic nuances, and the vital role it plays in the preservation of the Toda tribe's cultural heritage.

CHAPTER 1

# THE PLACE



# INDIA



TAMIL NADU

# OOTY



Ooty, officially Udhagamandalam, is a town and municipality in Tamil Nadu's Nilgiris district, situated 86 km northwest of Coimbatore. It serves as the district headquarters and is renowned as the "Queen of Hill Stations".

Initially inhabited by the Toda people, the East India Company took control in the 18th century. It served as the summer capital of the Madras Presidency.

Connected to the plains by Nilgiri Ghat roads and Nilgiri Mountain Railway, the region was previously called Ottakal Mandu, signifying "single stone" in Tamil.

This evolved into Udhagamandalam, anglicized to Ootacamund by the British which was further shortened to Ooty.

It is separated from the neighboring state of Karnataka by the Moyar river in the north and from the Anaimalai and Palani hills in the south by the Palghat Gap. It is situated at an altitude of 7,350 feet above sea level. The total area of the town is 30.36 km sq.

The town's economy thrives on the hospitality industry, catering to tourism and agriculture.



Doddabetta

# NILGIRIS

The Nilgiris district, is part of the Nilgiri Hills, known as the “blue mountains” due to the Kurunji flower, lending the slopes a bluish tint. It spans Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Kerala.

Doddabetta, reaching 2,637m, is the highest point in the Nilgiri Hills, a subrange of the Western Ghats.

The district’s administrative center is Ooty, bordered by Coimbatore, Erode, Chamarajnagar district of Karnataka, and Wayanad district of Kerala.



Nilgiris district, famed for its Gold mines, is recognized as Tamil Nadu’s first plastic-free district.

Founded as a British Raj summer resort, it retains a working steam railway line.

The district has an area of 2,552.50 km sq. It is basically hilly, lying at an elevation of 1,000 to 2,600 metres above MSL, and divided between the Nilgiri plateau and the lower, smaller Wayanad plateau. The district lies at the juncture of the Western Ghats and the Eastern Ghats.

## CONNECTIVITY

Ooty is well connected by good roads known as the Nilgiri Ghat Roads. One can visit this place by flight, train and road. To visit the Toda community in the hills, there are auto rickshaws, cabs and buses available.

Nilgiri Mountain Railway is a 1,000 metre gauge railway in Nilgiris district connecting Udagamandalam and Mettupalayam. The line from Coonoor to Ooty was completed in 1908. Operated currently by the Southern Railway zone of Indian Railways, it is the only rack railway in India and operates on its own fleet of steam locomotives between Coonoor and Udthagamandalam.

The nearest airport is Coimbatore International Airport, located 96 kilometres from the town. Ooty has three helipads, one at Theettukal and two at Kodanad with the Theettukal helipad, approved by Airports Authority of India for defence and VIP services.

Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ooty>



## ENVIRONMENT

Ooty features a subtropical highland climate.

The elevation of the Nilgiris results in a much cooler and wetter climate than the surrounding plains, so the area is popular as a comfortable retreat and is good for tea cultivation.

During summer the temperature reaches a maximum of 25 °C (77 °F) and a minimum of 10 °C (50 °F). During winter the temperature maximum is 20 °C (68 °F) and the minimum 0 °C (32 °F).

The district regularly receives rain during both the Southwest Monsoon and the Northeast Monsoon. The average rainfall is about 1,100 millimetres. The entire Gudalur and Pandalur, Kundah Taluks and parts of Udthagamandalam Taluk get rain from the Southwest Monsoon, while part of Udthagamandalam Taluk and the entire Coonoor and Kotagiri Taluks get rains of the Northeast Monsoon.

Lateritic, red loam, red sandy, black, alluvial, and colluvial are the five major soil types found in Ooty.

The Nilgiris is the source of two main river systems – the Bhavani and the Moyar, which comprise several streams emerging from high altitudes and flowing down to the Kaveri basin in Tamil Nadu. Ooty Lake is an artificial lake covering 65 acres created in 1824. Pykara, a river located 19 km from Ooty, rises at Mukurthi peak and flows through a series of cascades with the last two falls of 55 metres and 61 metres known as Pykara falls.

Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ooty>

# FLORA & FAUNA

Ooty showcases a diverse and abundant flora within the Nilgiris belt, featuring tropical, semitropical, and temperate vegetation. The landscape includes expansive tea gardens, grasslands, exquisite pine forests, eucalyptus groves, and Shola vegetation, providing a habitat for around 650 plant and tree species. The Nilgiris region is renowned for its production of eucalyptus oil, tea, and bauxite. The predominant cultivation of plantation crops such as tea and coffee is complemented by cardamom, pepper, and rubber. Tea thrives at elevations ranging from 1,000 to over 2,500 meters.

Situated in the South Western Ghats montane rain forests ecoregion, the Nilgiris houses a multitude of plant species, encompassing medicinal plants and endemic flowering varieties. Shola forest patches above 1,800 meters showcase stunted evergreen trees adorned with epiphytes. The native vegetation comprised meadows and grasslands on hillsides, complemented by shola forests in valleys. However, the British introduction of invasive species like pine, wattle, and eucalyptus, alongside the establishment of tea plantations, led to the dominance of these non-native species, displacing the indigenous vegetation.

The region is also a producer of eucalyptus oil and temperate-zone vegetables. Udthagamandalam and Coonoor Taluks cultivate potatoes and various vegetables, while Gudalur and Pandalur Taluks focus on crops such as paddy (rice), ginger, pepper, and rubber. Additionally, paddy cultivation is practiced in the Thengumarahada area in Kotagiri Taluk. Beyond these crops, millet, wheat, fruits, and vegetables are cultivated across the district. The agriculture relies mainly on rain-fed practices, with check dams strategically constructed to harness natural springs wherever possible.



Eucalyptus groves

Source and picture credit : <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ooty>



Nilgiri tahr



Nilgiri langur

Ooty is situated within the expansive Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve, India's largest protected forest area, designated in 1986 under UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere Programme. To the north-west, approximately 31 km away, lies Mudumalai National Park and tiger reserve, established in 1940 as India's first wildlife sanctuary, boasting the presence of the endangered Nilgiri langur.

The Nilgiris encompass two ecoregions: the South Western Ghats moist deciduous forests (and the South Western Ghats montane rain forests. These areas are vital habitats for diverse wildlife, including Asia's largest herd of elephants and significant tiger populations. The montane rain forests above 1500 meters feature stunted shola forests and grasslands inhabited by the endangered Nilgiri tahr.

Three national parks—Mudumalai, Mukurthi, and Silent Valley, safeguard portions of the Nilgiris. The entire range, along with parts of the Western Ghats, constitutes the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve.

The Nilgiris host a rich variety of fauna, including Bengal tigers, Indian elephants, gaurs, leopards, sloth bears, and various smaller species like Jungle cat, rusty-spotted cat, leopard cat, dhole, Golden jackal, Nilgiri marten, Small Indian civet, Asian palm civet, brown palm civet, ruddy mongoose, wild boar, Indian pangolin, Indian crested porcupine and Indian giant squirrel. Indian giant flying squirrel, Smooth-coated otter groups are observed along the Moyar River. Deer include sambar deer, chital, Indian spotted chevrotain, Indian muntjac, four-horned antelope and blackbuck.. The region's diverse birdlife, with over 200 species, includes endangered species such as the Malabar large-spotted civet and lion-tailed macaque. Renowned bird species like the Nilgiri pipit, Nilgiri woodpigeon, and Nilgiri blackbird are named after the region.

Source and picture credit : <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ooty>



## MAJOR LANDMARKS

Tourism is an important source of revenue for the Nilgiris. The district is home to several hill stations which are visited by tourists during summer. These include Ooty, Coonoor, Kotagiri. The Nilgiri Mountain Train, locally known as the Toy Train, attracts tourists as the journey has extensive views of the hills and forests. Bandipur National Park and Mudumalai National Park are commonly visited by wildlife enthusiasts, campers and backpackers.

The Rose Garden situated on the slopes of the Elk Hill at an altitude of 2 has more than 20,000 varieties of roses of 2,800 cultivars and is the largest rose garden in India. The garden also has a 20-million-year-old fossilized tree. The 22 acres Government Botanical Garden, laid out in 1847, has many species, both exotic and indigenous, of plants, shrubs, ferns, trees, herbal and bonsai plants and hosts an annual flower show in May. Other reminders of its colonial past include Stone House, a 19th-century residence, and the circa-1829 St.Stephen's Church. Its 55-acre Government Botanical Garden lies on the slopes of Doddabetta Peak.

A major tourist attraction in Ooty is a boat house established alongside the Ooty lake, which offers boating facilities to tourists. There is one located at the Pykara falls and dam. Established in 1986, the Deer Park is located on the edge of Ooty Lake, hosts a number of species of deer and is the second highest altitude zoo in India.

The Tribal Museum, opened in 1995, is part of the campus of Tribal Research Center which is about 10 km from Ooty and is home to rare artifacts and photographs of tribal groups of Tamil Nadu and Andaman and Nicobar, anthropological and archaeological primitive human culture and heritage.

The tea factory and museum entertain visitors where they can learn about the origin of different kinds of tea leaves all across the globe and the history of tea in India. In the factory, the process of tea processing and the machines are displayed.

CHAPTER 2

# THE PEOPLE



Toda men wearing Poothukulis by Mathimaran

## TRIBES OF NILGIRIS

### TODAS

Todas are a pastoral clan tending to buffaloes and making milk and milk products, cane and bamboo products. They are belonging to the Dravidian ethnic group. Their lives revolving around the local grasslands called 'sholas' and the herds of buffalo which they tend there. The women have for many years been creating beautiful Toda handmade embroidery with just some colours of threads on a traditional garment called Poothukuli. The Toda language is a member of the Dravidian family. The language is typologically aberrant and phonologically difficult. Toda language has no script, it is just spoken. All the Nilgiri tribes have no script, they read and write Tamil script only. With outsiders they communicate in fluent Tamil and Kannada along with Tulu. English is well understood but only some of them can communicate fluently.



Source and picture credit : [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Toda\\_people](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Toda_people)

### BADUGAS

The Badagas are the largest aboriginal Tribes of the Nilgiri district. They live in nearly 303 villages, called "Hattis", throughout the district. Their language is called "Badugu." This language has no script. Some of the villages are Kukal, Kadanad, Ithalar, Nundala, Meluru, Hulical, Athikaratty, Melkunda, Kilkundha, Ketti etc. They are also called as Gowdas of Nilgiris.

Before British-owned plantations, the Badaga community was the primary landholder, with a complex history involving linguistic and cultural misinterpretations. In 1931, they were classified as important primitive tribes of southern India.

The Badagas, with a population of about 135,000, constituting 18% of the district and have held substantial landownership in most Taluks of the district since the turn of the 21st century.



Source and picture credit : <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Badagas>

# KOTAS

Numerically Kotas have always been a small group not exceeding 1,500 individuals spread over seven villages for the last 160 years. They have maintained a lifestyle as a jack of all trades such as potters, agriculturalist, leather workers, carpenters, and black smiths and as musicians for other groups.

They form compact communities, and, at Kotagiri, their village consists of detached huts, and rows of huts arranged in streets. They were traditionally artisans and musicians. Each Kota family was associated with a number of Badaga and Toda families for whom they provided metal tools, wooden implements, and pots. Presently they are prosperous farmers, doctors, and postmasters. Their traditional customs and prosperity influence their relationships and socioeconomic status.



Source and picture credit : [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kota\\_people\\_\(India\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kota_people_(India))

# KURUMBAS

Originally pastoralists, the Kurumba were probably identical with or closely related to the Pallavas. They are field labourers or are engaged in the collection and gathering of forest produce, mainly wild honey and wax. The members of this community are short, have dark skin, and have protruding foreheads.

Kurumbar are partially Sanskritized to believing in Hinduism. The main deity of the tribe is Lord Shiva under the name of Bhairava. They also worship animals, birds, trees, rock hillocks, and snakes, along with the other Hindu deities. There are several divisions of Kurumba: Jenu, Betta and Alu.

The Kurumba art is an expression of its socio-religious fabric. The art is traditionally practiced by the male members of the temple caretakers, or priest to the Kurumba village.



Source and picture credit : [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kurumba\\_\(tribe\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kurumba_(tribe))

# IRULAS

The tribe numbers around 200,000 spread across Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka.

The Irulas practice some sort of Animism where they primarily believe in a Goddess named Inga who lives with her another 6 sisters worshipped in the form of stones under trees. The Irula people traditionally believe that these 7 sisters created the first Irula man and woman.

The Irula also believe in the presence of evil spirits known as Pe who can possess and haunt people in order to keep these spirits away a Rooster is sacrificed and offered to them.

Traditionally, the main occupation of the Irulas has been snake, rat catching and honey collection. They also work as labourers in the fields of the landlords during the sowing and harvesting seasons or in the rice mills. Fishing and cattle farm is also a major occupation.



Source and picture credit : [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Irula\\_people](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Irula_people)

# PANIYANS

Paniyans live in the Gudalur and Pandalur taluks. They are the most ancient inhabitants of Wayanad and are expert hunters, agriculturists, dancers and musicians. They were brought over from the Malabar in Kerala to the Nilgiris by the Manthadan Chettis as agricultural labourers. The term Paniyan originates from the Malayalam word pani meaning work; pannikkar means worker or labourer. The term paniyan is used to address males, whereas the females are referred to as panichi. In physical appearance they resemble African tribes. At one time they were the principal stock-in-trade for the slave trade on the West Coast. They speak 'Paniya bhasha,' which is a dialect of Malayalam with some Tamil and Tulu words; and they are able to converse in Malayalam and Tamil.

The Paniya habitat is thick forest where wild animals roam; or cultivated land where crops like paddy, millets, plantains and spices like pepper, ginger, tapioca etc. are grown; and also marshy low-lying lands where paddy is grown. Every Paniyan settlement has its own traditional panchayat or council called Kottani. It is a permanent body consisting of a non-hereditary headman (called Muppan or Kuttan) and a group of elderly Paniyans called 'Muppanmars.' Paniya religion is animist. Ancestral spirits and male and female deities are worshipped. The spirits are invoked for good actions by their shaman called 'Attali'. Their chief goddess is Kattau Bhavathi (goddess of the forest).

Source : [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paniya\\_people](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paniya_people)

# HISTORY OF TODA COMMUNITY

The Toda Tribe, a pastoral community situated in the Nilgiri Hills of southern India, possesses a distinct Dravidian language, which stands out as the most unconventional within the Dravidian family. It comprises of 67 villages. Their settlements consist of three to seven small thatched houses, forming a pastoral landscape. Belonging to the Hindu Pancha Pandavar lineage from the Mahabharat era, the Todas revere buffaloes as divine entities.

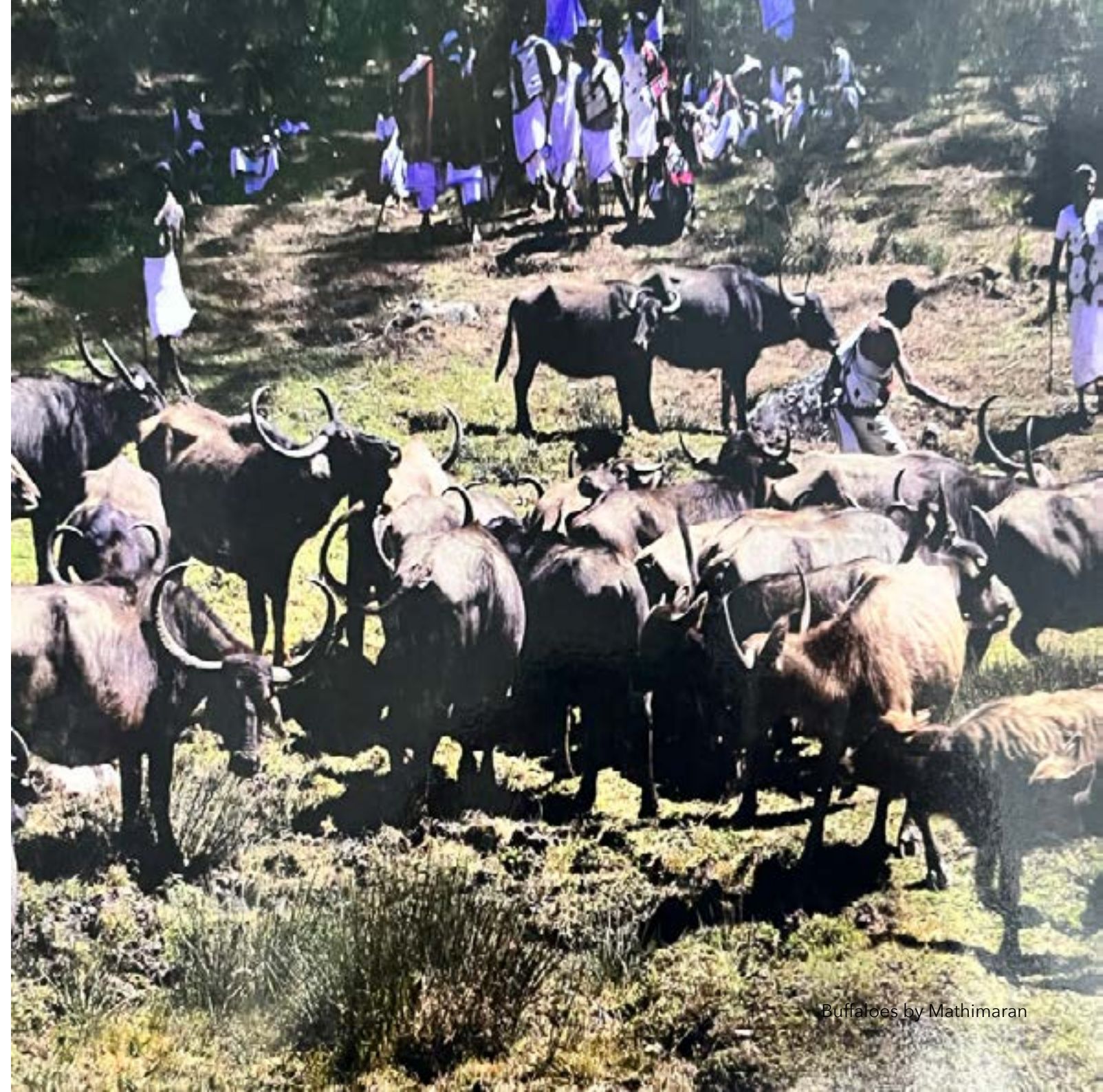
Both men and women are actively involved in agriculture, cultivating crops such as carrots, potatoes, cabbage, beetroot, beans, radish, and white garlic, while men additionally care for the buffaloes of each household.

Threats to Toda culture emerged as their pasture land was lost to agriculture and afforestation. Toda lands are now part of The Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve, a UNESCO-designated International Biosphere Reserve, and are under consideration by the UNESCO World Heritage Committee for selection as a World Heritage Site.

The origin of the Todas, one of the original tribes inhabiting the highest regions of the Nilgiris mountain range, remains unclear. In 1823, the Collector of Coimbatore, John Sullivan, acquired their land for a nominal one rupee, establishing the town of Udagamandalam. Interaction with western civilization subsequently brought about significant changes in the Todas' lifestyle. Initially, children would hide in fear, having never seen British faces before. The British, attempting to comprehend the community through sign language, gradually communicated with the tribes, discovering the restriction of outsiders in their Mundu. Impressed by their innocence, the British chose not to harm the tribals, leaving them with acres of land in the hills upon departing India.

Despite speculations about Toda origins in various distant places, linguistic evidence points clearly to their South Indian roots. The uncertainty about their ancestors' ascent to the Nilgiris from the east or west prevails, with the west being the more likely option. Toda artifacts from stone-circle burial sites hint that they might not have been present before the Christian era. The first written evidence dates back to 1117, detailing a Hoysala general's conquest. In 1799, the mountains became a British possession, leading to increased administrative control over the Todas.

While linguistically, culturally, and economically distinct, the Todas are an integral part of traditional Nilgiri society, maintaining affiliations with the wider civilization of South India. Traditional Nilgiri neighbors included the Kota artisan caste, the dominant Badaga group, and forest-dwelling communities like Kurumba and Irula. The arrival of British administration in the early nineteenth century disrupted their old economic interdependence and introduced a cash-crop and plantation-based economy. The growth of immigrant populations, markets, and intensified contact with mainstream South Indian Hinduism transformed the Toda way of life. Modern Todas, engaged in various occupations including factory work, and a few college-educated, now coexist with both traditional Nilgiri neighbors and immigrant populations.



Buffaloes by Mathimaran

# THE TODAS



Toda women wearing poothukulis

## APPEARANCE

A style of life simple and organised, yet sophisticated defines the Toda tribe. Most men and women are tall and well built. Their colour is mostly on the darker side to wheatish complexion. A few of the women and children are very fair too. Living in mountainous regions give them wrinkles on their faces early on. They have well defined and very sharp features. They walk long distances and hence most of them are very fit. Men play football and so they are muscular and full of energy. They have impressive figures, sharp features, keen eyes and the women wear their hair in long ringlets during special occasions along with their Poothukuli especially during weddings and festivities.



# FAMILY STRUCTURE

Generally, Todas have polyandrous type of families. A woman with her multiple husbands and children usually form this type of family. If the husbands are brothers, the family is called “fraternal polyandrous family”. Besides, compound families are found among the Todas. In this type, apart from a common wife, the husbands keep their individual wives to live together with their children. Fraternal polyandry in traditional Toda society was fairly common; however, this practice has now been totally abandoned, as has female infanticide.



Authority in a family, rests on the eldest male. Property passes from father to legal sons according to the rule of inheritance. Females have no right on property. There are three types of property among the Toda - Personal property, Family property and communal property. Personal property includes the clothes and ornaments. Family property comprises of hut, utensils and buffaloes. Besides, the homestead, pasture ground and sacred buffaloes those owned by the clan under the Communal property. On the other hand, inheritance of family property, the eldest as well as the youngest son get the privilege; both of them own one buffalo extra.



Interestingly, the women names end or begin with titles like muthu meaning pearl, malli meaning Jasmine flower, sin meaning gold in toda. poof. Eg Poof Nila, Reeta Sin were the names of the women. The maiden names of women do not change after marriage. Menfolk are busy with rearing buffaloes or agriculture. Hence are not very much interested in studies as are women and girls. But in the modern days all children are being sent to school and good education is being provided for both the sexes. The boys get used to playing football since a very young age and most of them have multiple achievements in the same field. The women are the only ones allowed to do Toda embroidery, though not many girls continue practicing this craft due to other opportunities, the mothers make sure their daughters atleast know how to do the embroidery.



# OCCUPATION

All their economic activity is centred around their buffaloes. They rear only buffaloes for milk. They make various products from milk such as ghee, cheese, butter, curd etc. which they sell or exchange with the neighbouring tribal communities.



Toda woman cleaning the vessels outside her house

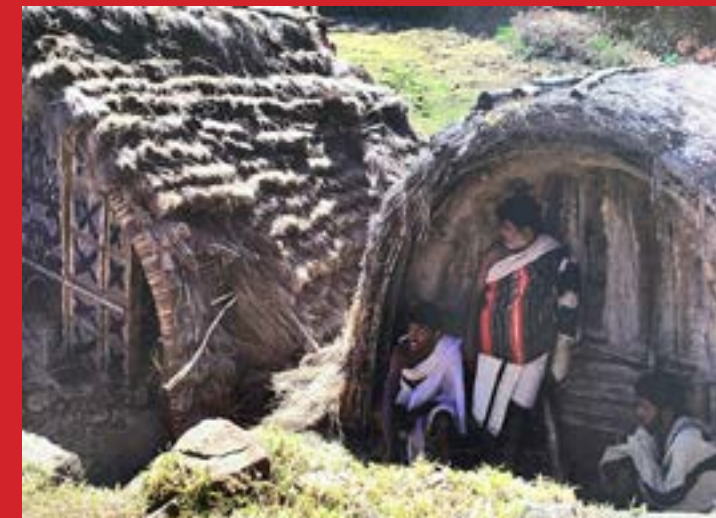
The Toda have no weapons. Their clubs, bows and arrows have ceremonial functions presently. The Socio-economically a symbiotic relationship is followed among the tribes of Nilgiri hills. The Todas enjoy the highest social status. The dairy work is taken care of by the male members. Females are totally engaged in the household work like rearing of the children, fetching of the drinking water, collecting of fuel from forest or working on the Toda crafts and so on.

Previously, the males used to cook, but now this task has been transferred to the females. All Toda people have land, where they practice agriculture. In the present days, men go for employment outside and women along with embroidery do agriculture too. Carrot, potato, cabbage, beans, beetroot and radish and white garlic. Only men take care of the buffaloes.

Source: Onsite research



Toda man carving wood



Toda men by the temple

Picture credit : Mathimaran

# RELIGION

Religion plays a strong role in the Toda society. By birth everyone is Hindu. But all go to churches and temples if they feel like it. People who changed their religion to Christianity did so not by brain washing but by their own will. Often while being Hindu they go to Churches as sometimes their heart says they must go, they say their religious beliefs are connected to how they feel rather than hard and fast rules to be followed by each religion. One must not ask tribes what religion they belong to, as they are one with nature. They believe they are descendants of Pancha Pandavas, but there is no idol worship.

Toda temples are constructed in a circular pit lined with stones. They are similar in appearance and construction to Toda huts. A temple is called a Kovil. If the members of the Mandu make non veg food in their houses these Mandus do not have kovils, These are mostly small Mandus with a few residences. The big Mandus rules are very rigid as they have Kovils or temples. Women are not allowed to enter or go close to these huts that are designated as temples. They are allowed only till the main gate of the temple. The temples have roofs of a special types of grass which is changed in a few years. Many men go into the forest to get this grass and bring it very ceremonially. The people are prohibited from wearing shoes or any type of foot covering near the temple area.

Womenfolk are not allowed within the precincts of the dairy, temple as it is believed that they would corrupt the sanctity of the dairy. An egalitarian thinking also found in their society. An earthen lamp is lit in the temple made of straws and the priest also must wear the traditional dress while performing puja. Ghee is used for the lamp and no matches are used. Fire is lit by brushing the cloth with a special wood that are available in the forest.



According to the Todas, the goddess Teikirzi and her brother On first created the sacred buffalo and then the first Toda man. The first Toda woman was created from the right rib of the first Toda man. Many rites feature the buffalo, as its milk and other products form the basis of their diet. The Toda religion exalted high-class men as holy milkmen, giving them sacred status as priests of the holy dairy. The revered place of the buffalo in Toda society represents a remarkable feature of their life. Numerous ghosts and evil spirits are considered to be responsible for bringing unnatural death, diseases, epidemic and loss of milk in buffaloes.

Source: Onsite research



Source: Onsite research



Artwork with ghee that has blackened over time



Toda buffalo

Every family sends one son or male member and he remains the priest for a particular period. The holy milkman or the priest was prohibited from walking across bridges while in office.

This happens by rotation as this member has to stay in the temple during this period and do the offering to God and lit the lamp. He is allowed to graze his buffaloes alone but cannot come in to his residence for that period. The food cooked as offering to God is called Kovil Sappadu and is made with rice, milk and jaggery. Young boys are also trained in this tradition and it is compulsory for the boys and the men to do the temple duty.

## FOOD

The Todas are vegetarians and do not eat meat, eggs that can hatch, or fish (although some villagers do eat fish). Even the schools do not allow the children to bring Non vegetarian food. The buffalo were milked in a holy dairy, where the priest or milkman lives. Buffalo milk is used in a variety of forms: ghee, butter, butter milk, yogurt, cheese and drunk as plain milk. Rice is a staple, eaten with dairy products or curries. They now eat a lot of vegetables and fruits locally grown or chutneys along with rice. The sweet is Pongal made of milk, Jaggery and rice which is called, Kovil Vella Sapadu.

Their favourite dish is rice, boiled in milk and jaggery called Pal Sapadu. Earlier, they used to eat milk and buttermilk and they used to get fresh fruits as they used to do agriculture, they used to be very healthy and never had anything that is spicy.

They eat meat of deer, but other meat is forbidden for them. Both the males and females of the Toda community are addicted to liquor. The habits of smoking also prevail among both the sexes. Now like rest of the world everything is bought from stores nearby they eat all kinds of vegetarian food at their homes. However non vegetarian food is not allowed to be made or consumed within the village, if interested they travel to Ooty to eat non veg and come back. A very common food item was and has been rice as it was always cultivated in their farms.



Source: Onsite research

Source: Onsite research

Kovil Vella Sapadu

## TATTOOS



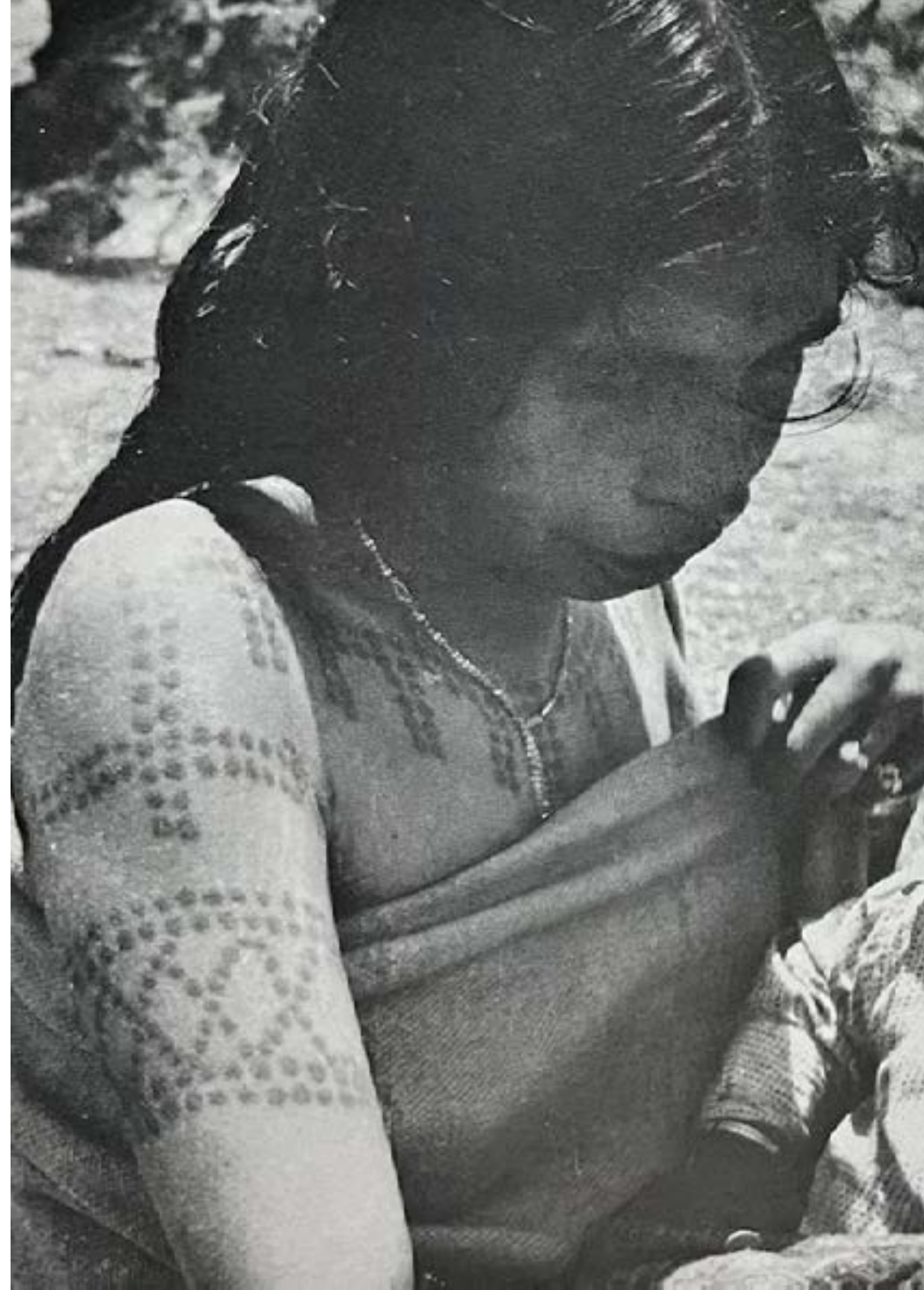
Todas are very fond of Tattoos. They believe that they would not be allowed into the after life if they did not have tatoos.

The women get their husbands names tattooed. They get their full leg tattooed too.



They get Tamil people to come and do their tattoos. Some women have a lot of body tattoo too. The designs are mostly representative of their embroidery but in dot form.

Source: Onsite research



## JEWELLERY



Women wear jewellery during special occasions like festivals , marriages etc.

Elders wear "Golis" and "Thagash" which are necklaces and armband which is "Konorch" earlier with stone now these are made of silver.

They used different types of ornaments like earring, nose-ring, nose pin, finger- ring, chain etc., which are usually made on silver, copper and iron.



Source: Onsite research

# HABITAT

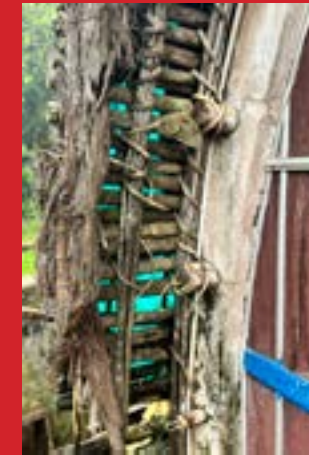
A Toda village is situated on the hill slopes. Generally, a village consists of ten to twelve huts. The huts are of two types. The first type is half barrel shaped long huts measuring about 15 feet 12 feet. They are built of bamboo fastened with rattan and are thatched. Thicker bamboo canes are arched to give the hut its basic bent shape. Wide. Thinner bamboo canes (rattan) are tied close and parallel to each other over this frame. Dried grass is stacked over this as thatch. Each hut is enclosed within a wall of loose stones. The front and back of the hut are usually made of dressed stones (mostly granite). The hut has a tiny entrance at the front – about 3 feet (90 cm) wide, 3 feet (90 cm) tall, through which people must crawl to enter the interior. This unusually small entrance is a means of protection from wild animals.<sup>7</sup> The front portion of the hut is decorated with the Toda art forms, a kind of rock mural painting. The inner structure of the hut is made up of bamboo-splits or canes, over which dry leaves and branches of the tree are placed. A single low door is present at the front. Inside of the hut is obviously dark and stuffy. A hut is divided into two distinct portions – the inside room is used as workshop where the females do not get an entry. The outside room is for living and other household work.

The second type of hut is not barrel – shaped. It is circular in shape and made of stone. The roof is very high and constricted gradually from the rounded wall. The type of hut is used to keep the sacred buffaloes. Some Mandus or clusters, where they make non veg food in the house do not have Kovils or temples.

Source: Onsite research



Current Toda hut (Arsh)



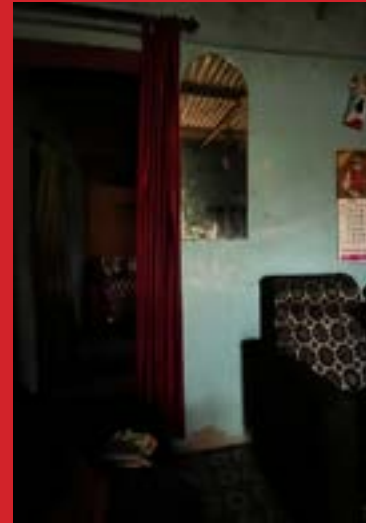
They get water from hills and have no water problems. These days bore water is also available. Ooth or water that comes out from the mountains provide them good water for al uses. They generally have dogs who protect their houses. Fire is always on in the house always warm. They never switch off the fire.

Not everyone is allowed in all Mundus, it is better to have a Toda person with you as they allow entry due on the basis of trust they have within their community. They used to live in hamlets to protect themselves from the cold and to have a warm environment.

Buffaloes are taken care of at home and temple. Kovil buffaloes have big horns and not everyone knows the difference between the two. Only todas can do so. “Posthur” are sacred buffaloes. Normal buffaloes have been named by people who own them.

Women not allowed to wear footwear while entering the mandu, the men can, one must always respect the elders and never talk disrespectfully to them, if you ever go out of the mandu for traveling, once back the resident of that Mandu has to meet all the elder’s and take their

Source: Onsite research



## FESTIVALS

The entire lifestyle and beliefs of the Toda tribe revolves around farming and nature, where their religion is based on buffaloes and their milk, and the dairies revered as temples. During festivities and funeral, songs about the cult of the buffalo are composed and chanted The Modhweth festival on the last Sunday of December or the first Sunday of January to herald the New Year and the Upputhra Pandigai where salt is given to the buffaloes are the two main festivals of the Todas.

### Modhwedth festival

Toda tribes usher in the New Year with heartfelt. prayers, traditional melodies, and joyful dances during. the 'Modhweth' festival This is celebrated at the the Moonpo temple, Muthanadu Mund, near Thalaikundah. This temple is said to be one of the oldest Toda temples still in existence. Hundreds of Toda different clans living in different villages in the upper slopes of the Nilgiris come to the "mund" or Toda village during the Modhweth.It is also called locally as the Kovil Pandigai. Only a man who has become a dairyman-priest, following the elaborate ordination ceremonies specific to each grade, may milk the corresponding grade of sacred buffaloes and, incorporating an array of rituals, process it into butter, buttermilk, curd, and clarified butter.

Before this, if the roof grass of the temple has to be renewed, the Toda men go to the Purti hills or Upper Bhavani hills where they get mud, grass and bamboo that is available only there. They leave in the morning in lorries these days, camp in tents, procure this material and come back and build the temple. Ladies don't go to the temple at this time, only the men are allowed. New designs are made on the temple with their fingers using ghee. This ghee turns black later and stays as a design.

Morthpath is the dance to welcome the New Year! It is compulsory to wear Poothukuli for all festivals. Women wear their silver jewellery and do up their hair in ringlets.



Todas by Mathimaran

### Uputhrapandigai or Upparth or Hausti

This is a special festival for the Buffaloes. water is filled in a pit and salt is mixed in it. The Buffaloes are made to drink this water to be healthy. This is celebrated from April 1 st to August end and is compulsory in all the Munds. They make Urunda sappadu and butter as specialities during this festival. All buffaloes have names. There is a high regard for the temple buffaloes and they are not seen by commoners as they are kept in the temple dairy.



Todas by Mathimaran

Apart from these major festivals, prayers for rain to arrive are done separately in houses. The Todas always dance or sing in groups of minimum 10 men, women or mixed groups, never alone. The women compose songs on marriage, love, nature, friendship and even temple songs. A rhythmic clap, song and dance about marriage love during all functions even birthday and funerals. These days every settlement has community hall the men play the flute. Cultural events involve, temple songs and dances about love, friendship.

## STAGES OF LIFE

### CHILD BIRTH

The Toda relationship with the nature around them begins with their birth rituals. The child is a passive participant, but the mother is required to handle several specific plant species to validate the ritual activity. A few weeks later during the infant's Muthardat ceremony which is the naming ceremony, the grandfather uncovers the child's face outdoors in the temple to God for the first time also pointing out to the child various elements of the natural environment: the rising sun, the birds, the buffaloes, bodies of water, sacred rocks, hills, etc. The girl child will be named after one or another of these surrounding natural phenomena: for a girl, perhaps it will be a Pooh the flower, nila the moon, a bird's feather, or a precious metal sin which is gold. A boy will be named of after a specific rock, water course, swamp, hill, or shola forest within the vicinity of the child's natal hamlet. The child is given a new banian type dress to be worn on this day. The Poothukuli plays a crucial role as it symbolizes a protective and sacred covering for both the mother and the newborn. It is believed to have spiritual significance, providing a sense of security and sanctity during the childbirth process.



## PUBERTY

On the attainment of puberty by boys, they do undergo an ear-piercing ceremony. Traditionally, girls underwent both a symbolic and an actual defloration (loss of virginity) to mark their entry into adulthood, although it is uncertain whether these rites are continued today. In earlier days, a chosen man would cover his bride with his cloth for a few minutes. After a few days a strong man would be chosen to deflower the bride on an appointed night. Only after this, the chosen man would accept his bride. It is uncertain whether these rites are continued today as after the British came things changed a lot. Many Toda women embraced Christianity, in order to avoid traditional rituals like pre-puberty defloration, social paternity, and funeral rites of sacrificing the buffaloes and have established their own families away from the traditional family organization. Poothukuli is worn by Toda girls during their puberty rituals, symbolizing their transition to womanhood.

Source: Onsite research



## WEDDING

Todas practiced “fraternal polyandry”, wife of a brother is regarded as the wife of all brothers. Once the community used to practice female infanticide. Therefore, the number of females became gradually less than the number of males. As a reason of disparity in the ratio between male and female, polyandry got a sanction in the society.

When the new system of law and order was introduced by the British, infanticide became a crime, and the sex-ratio got more or less equalized. Now monogamy is more or less possible in this society. Still go on practicing polyandry as a traditional custom. At the same time, availability of more females has urged the males to keep wives on individual basis and such practice has given rise to the compound families.

Generally, the boys are not very educated even these days as they tend to their buffaloes, have their own lands and practice agriculture or play football. But girls on the other hand study well and have to marry a less educated male if the women has to be accepted in the Mund. The bridegroom should be able to present his in laws with buffaloes, at least five before proposing marriage. It is not seen as dowry but as something that would help with their daughter's livelihood. If the girl does not accept, then these buffaloes have to be returned to the groom and his family too.

Intercaste marriage is prevalent in the present days but the couple will not be allowed to enter the munds nor can their parents invite them over even for childbirth, The laws are very strict about intercaste marriage. Those who marry outside the Munds are not even allowed to come back for their parents funeral too.

Poothukuli plays a symbolic role during the wedding ceremony. It is believed to bring blessings and protection to the bride, signifying her transition into married life.

Source: Onsite research



Source: Onsite research

## BABY SHOWER

The baby shower is the most important celebration in Toda culture and is grandly celebrated. A woman's first pregnancy is seen as ritually contaminating and, like childbirth, a threat to the dairy or dairies of the woman's settlement. In the past usually around the fifth month of her pregnancy she would be confined in a pollution hut constructed outside the bounds of the hamlet. Today, this custom has been abandoned, though the rites associated with the beginning and ending of this period of exile are still followed.

In the seventh month of the first pregnancy, the baby shower is called Pitsch during which the bow-and-arrow ceremony is performed, by which the child-to be is formally affiliated with the clan of the father (patriclan) and given its place in Toda society. This ceremony, at which the husband prepares and gives his pregnant wife an imitation bow and arrow, is a particularly important communal event and is accompanied by dancing, singing, and feasting.

The Poothukuli is draped over the pregnant woman as part of the ritual, signifying protection, well-being, and cultural identity. During a baby shower reflects the tribe's connection to their traditions and the desire to pass them on to the next generation.



Source: Onsite research



Source: Onsite research

## DEATH

The deceased is covered with the Poothukuli the person wore or they borrow a newly made one from another person and the body is tied with a black thread. The Poothukuli assumes a great importance during the death of the person as he is sent off with his own Poothukuli mostly. Food and ornaments of the person when he lived are also provided with the body which are believed to help him or her in the after life.

There are two types of funeral rites-Green and Dry. The Green funeral is performed immediately after death. In the green funeral, a few buffaloes are immolated with a belief that those buffaloes will serve the diseased soul in the other world. After cremation, pieces of charred bones and hair are collected. Dry funeral is performed after a few months. Dry funeral is usually organized collectively, where the chief-mourners of different dead persons join together.

The two clans Tordash and Tevil assist each other during a death. If a death has occurred in the Tordash clan, the Tevil clan helps get all the things ready for the funeral including the cot and vice versa. The Tordash and Tevil people originated from the same clan, but later divided  
The sons get the property of the deceased and daughters cannot claim any rights.

Source: Onsite research

CHAPTER 3

# THE CRAFT



## TODA EMBROIDERY



Toda Embroidery, locally known as "pukhoor," is an exclusive art form practiced by Toda pastoral women in Nilgiris, Tamil Nadu. Created with red and black woolen threads on a white cotton background, the embroidery has a fine finish resembling woven cloth. Notably, both sides of the fabric are usable, and Toda people take pride in this heritage, with both men and women adorning themselves with the embroidered cloaks and shawls.



Local terms like 'kuty' or 'awtty' for "stitching" and 'kutyvoy' for the embroidered piece are used to describe Toda embroidery. Materials include roughly woven white cloth, woolen black and red threads, occasional use of blue threads, and manufactured needles. Inspired by nature, daily life, and mythological stories, Toda women creatively develop patterns without the aid of pattern books. Motifs like the Buffalo horn, Sun, Moon, Stars, flowers, and mountains are common. Toda embroidery, rooted in geometric designs, even influenced the naming of Toda languages, where 'Puhur' means flower.



What distinguishes this embroidery is its sewing pattern. Unlike mainstream embroideries, Toda embroidery employs the reverse-stitch method directly on the warp and weft yarns of the base fabric without a frame. The intricate patterns closely follow the thread count, resembling machine-woven precision with no rough edges at the back. Surprisingly, women without technical knowledge achieve this remarkable accuracy and intricacy without using any sewing frame.

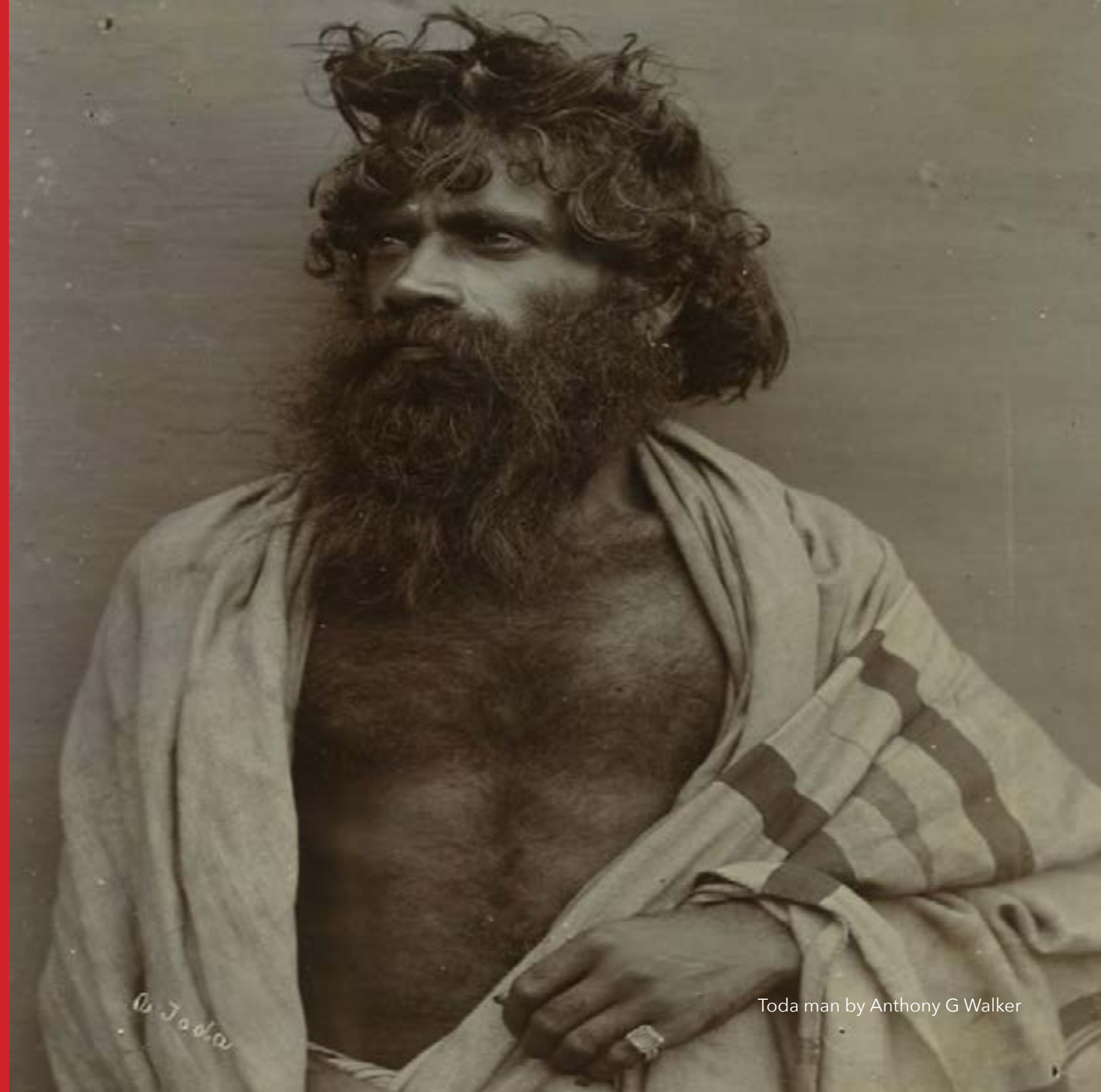


## HISTORY OF TODA EMBROIDERY

India is a country which has a rich culture, tradition, art music, literature, and sculpture and exhibits university in diversity through various charms of festivals, rituals, art music, costume, and languages.

Embroidery is no exception. The Vedic literature of 5000 B.C. refers to embroidery work. The remains of Mohenjodaro of the Indus valley civilization reveal embroidery work as a manifestation of the artistic creativity of the people there. It is observed from ancient times, even primitive men did decorate themselves through bodily decoration.

Primitive man worshipped nature and it was one of the sources of inspiration from which he picked up motifs of floral, bird, and animal kingdom available geographically. The Poothukuli, used to be mostly plain in the olden days with very little embroidery, over time with access to materials, the embroidery and the motif library started building and now the Poothukuli is filled with the craft.

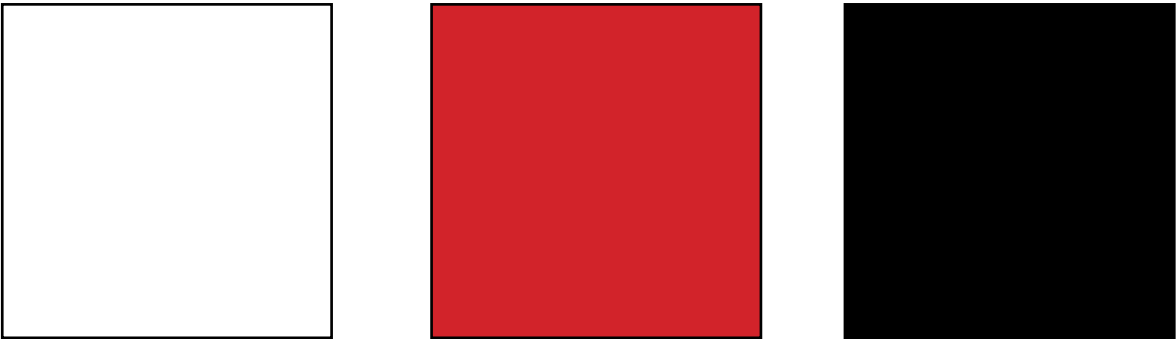


Toda man by Anthony G Walker

# RAW MATERIALS

The primary materials utilized in this artistic process include handwoven, unbleached, matted, and loosely woven cotton fabric, along with a needle and two-ply acrylic embroidery thread. The acquisition of fabrics occurs in Karoor, near Tirupur, Tamil Nadu, with women typically ordering bundles of 1000 meters. Before the availability of acrylic yarn, vegetable fibre was used as a thread however these days embroidery threads are widely in use. The locally available woolen threads employed for the embroidery enhance the authenticity of this craft.

The coarse cotton fabric, traditionally in shades of white, beige, or cream, serves as the canvas for this unique embroidery. Predominantly, black and red threads are skillfully employed to craft various motifs, with the flower being the most prevalent design. The close connection between this art form and nature is evident, given the tribe's residence in the midst of natural surroundings. The utilization of materials from Karoor, the choice of earthy colors, and the incorporation of natural motifs underscore the symbiosis between Toda embroidery and the tribe's environment.



The traditional patterns were limited to red and black threads. The colours symbolize their cultural beliefs: the base WHITE indicates purity and innocence; RED depicts adolescence and youth; BLACK depicts maturity.



Mat woven cotton fabric



Red and black 2 ply acrylic yarn



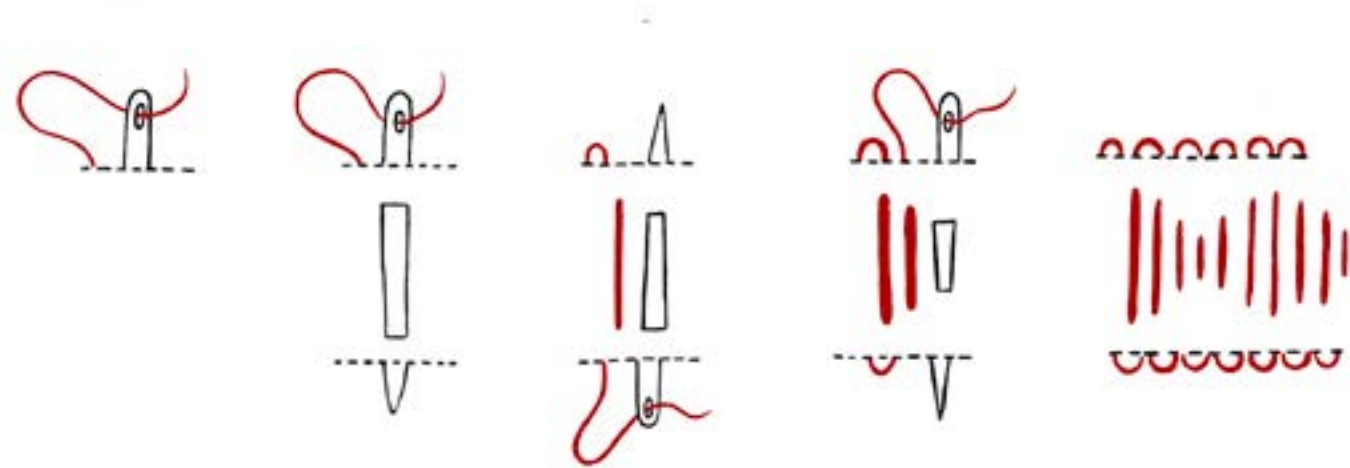
2 inch long embroidery needle



Tightly woven farbic patch to be used in Poothukulis

TECHNIQUE

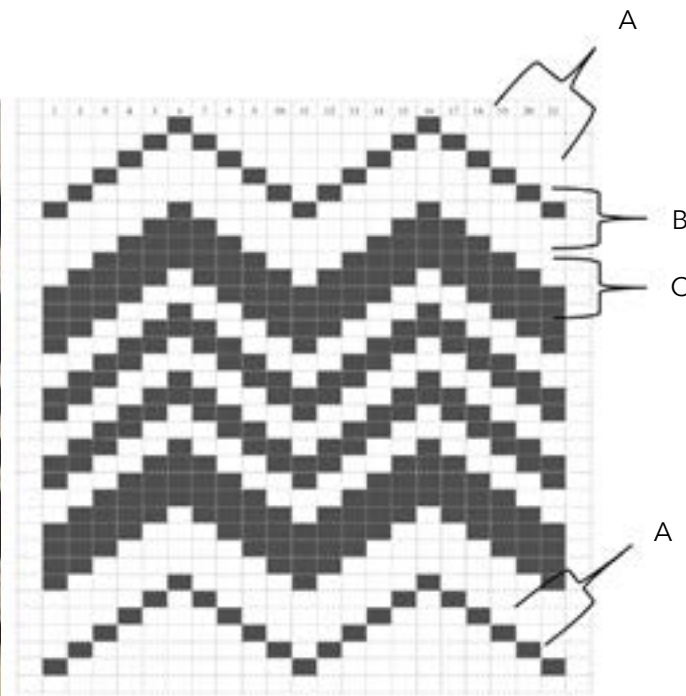




Technique

The distinguishing feature of this embroidery lies in its reliance on thread counts, a departure from modern embroidery, which typically relies on preset patterns and designs. Intriguingly, indigenous Toda women, lacking modern numerical literacy, demonstrate remarkable skill in embroidering geometric patterns with precision, all without external aids like scales or patterns. Another notable characteristic that sets this embroidery apart from modern counterparts is the equally exquisite reverse side, devoid of hanging threads and knots. While this demands significant time and effort, the ultimate beauty of the finished product justifies the painstaking process.





In this figure, the black boxes indicate visible stitches on the front, while the white boxes represent stitches where the thread passes on the back. The areas labeled as 'A' at the top and bottom of each vertical row feature a unique loose loop stitch, skillfully employed by Toda women to create an embossed effect at the ends of a pukhoor. This loop stitch contributes to the preference for the embossed side as the recto and the finished side as the verso. Areas labeled 'B' signify reversed stitches, with the digit indicating the number of threads counted before reinserting the needle. Similarly, 'C' represents front stitches, with the numeral indicating the thread count. All 'B' divisions appear as white gaps on the front but reveal thread patterns on the back, while black boxes on the front denote stitches and gaps.

The 'loops in front' play a crucial role throughout the embroidery process, forming a thick line as a border on the front side, creating a pattern. Each vertical row consists of a pair of threads, starting at the bottom and working in opposite directions for subsequent rows. After row 11, rows 2 to 11 are repeated to form rows 12 to 21, and this sequence continues to achieve the desired pattern length. There is no designated leader or group of Toda people considered the best at this embroidery, though some individuals may work faster than others.

Initially, motifs like the Sun (peesch pukhoor), Tur pukhoor resembling a river, and mudhir pukhoor resembling a mat were limited. The embroidery process involves counting, and the effect achieved cannot be replicated through weaving. Contrary to other embroidery methods, they eschew the use of a ring, emphasizing that their designs, predominantly straight lines, necessitate counting, and even a small count mistake can compromise the entire design. Authentic Toda embroidery is exclusively handmade, with no imitation products in the market. While individuals outside the tribe may attempt the embroidery, there is only one standard length needle used in the authentic practice.



MOTIFS, PATTERNS AND SIGNIFICANCE



Although the Todas favor studying floral landscapes, Toda embroidery predominantly features celestial bodies, reptiles, animals, and buffalo horns, using red and black colors. Rabbit ears are a constant depiction on the embroidered cloth's boundary. Another common design, black triangles and blocks, is woven in honor of their first priest. Women practicing embroidery consider their work a tribute to nature.

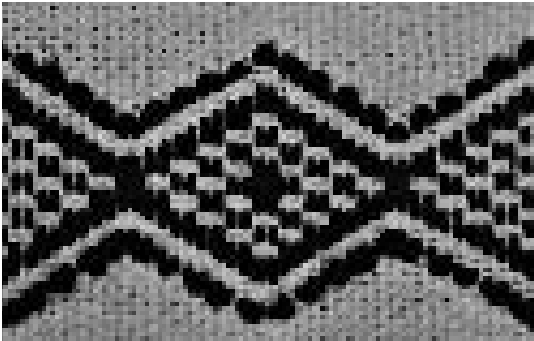
Toda embroidery comprises more than 300-400 motifs, all formed through experimentation inspired by nature. There is no motif library; instead, motifs are passed down through generations, and each generation introduces new designs as they experiment. After mastering the art form, individuals gradually develop their unique designs.

There is a resemblance between Toda embroidery and Anatolian motifs, featuring crosses, rosettes, and the bull—a crucial symbol in the tripartite belief system. The colors of black, red, and white also symbolize the Underworld, Earth, and Celestial realms, respectively.

The embroidery, exclusively done by women, draws inspiration from daily life and nature. Motifs are inspired by rattan binding, butterflies, sacred snakes, peacock tail feathers, and more. While modern motifs emerge, old designs remain popular.

Geometric motifs inspired by the Nilgiri mountains include 'twedhhr' for squirrel stripes, 'peshk' for butterfly wings, and 'Kwudrkorr' for beehives. Symbolic communication is crucial in Toda embroidery, conveying meanings ranging from everyday details to universal concepts like gods and the spirit world.

Women express their emotions through embroidery, treating it like meditation. Counting threads serves as a distraction from stress and sadness throughout the weeks and months spent creating products.



Kopann pukhoor

This is a motif inspired by the patterned wings of butterfly that are present around the hamlets (flying jewels).



Modhery pukhoor

This is a pattern inspired and named after, the 'mat' plant (modhery) which grows in marshy areas as large clumps with distinctively sniff and spikey flowers.



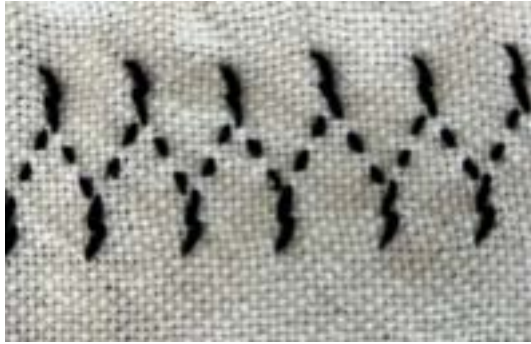
Mettofykonn pukhoor

It is a shortened term for mee(r) shtoofvkonn which is an embroidery motif inspired by the patterns on a peacock's tail feather.



Awkhofeihh(r)shy pukhoor

This is a motif inspired by the patterns on the body of nawkhorof or cobra. For Todas the cobra is sacred, the protector of their dairy- temples. The cobra motif is usually embroidered with two parallel sides, with kwudrkorr pukhoor honeycomb pattern in the centre.



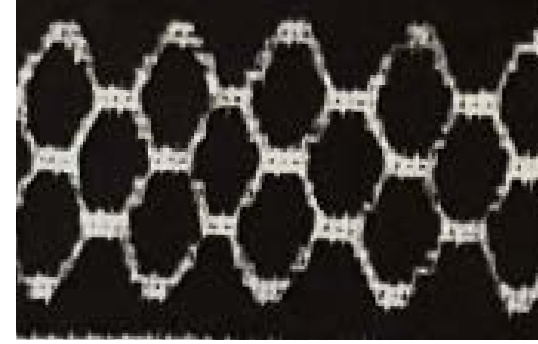
Ocvett pukhoor

This is a motif inspired by Toda architectural technology, the cane braiding work employed for temples. The work o means 'edge', and as the name suggests this type of pattern is usually embroidered on the edges of a garment. The Ocvett embroidery work prevents the edges of the fabric from fraying. The basic pattern is that of a V, or two V's, end to end so that they resemble an X.



Wehdrykht pukhoor

This pattern is used as a border for other elaborate designs. It is embroidered in rows at right angles to the direction of the main pattern. The embroidery is in one continuous line with no spaces and this motif is also known as 'stripped cane braiding pattern' inspired from the stripped cane used in the fabrication of tradition barrel-vaulted temples and homes.



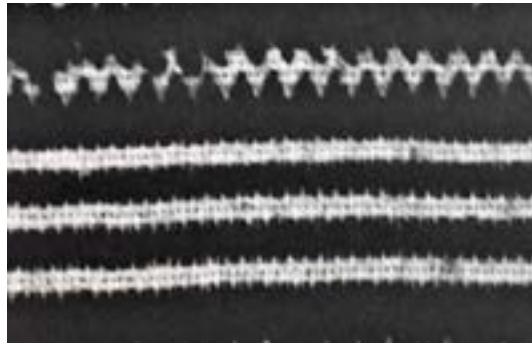
Kwudrkorr pukhoor

This motif is also known as 'honeycomb pattern'. The Todas are enthusiastic honey-gatherers, and have a unique method of harvesting honey.



Twehhdr pukhoor

Twehhdr, the name means the pattern in pairs. It is said the pattern is inspired by certain prominent hills, peaks, valleys and sholas of the Toda homeland. Traditionally, the motif was embroidered on a new cloak to envelope a corpse, and so ensures safe passage for the diseased to the realm of the dead.



Annil pukhoor

This pattern is named after the Jungle Striped Squirrel (Annil), copied from the distinctive three-stripes that appear on the squirrel's upper body. It is another motif embroidered on a cloak for the dead.



Pemilodh pukhoor

This is the 'without a waist pattern'. Another ancient design, its name is based on the way the threads are drawn during the embroidery process, so that there is no arched waistline to the final pattern.



Tagaa(r)sh pukhoor

This motif symbolizes the sun along with the moon. This is designed to replicate the rays of the sun (pee(r)sh) and is the most attractive and popular pattern.



Ehr-kwehhtr pukhoor

This is also popularly known as buffalo horn pattern. Toda women are unable to resist embroidery, representation of their wonderful buffalos. An example in this category is pob pukhoor, 'snake pattern'.



Tigall pukhoor

This is the moon (tigall) pattern, and is thus of some importance, as the Todas have traditionally followed the lunar calendar. Most ceremonies begin or end at around the period of the new moon.



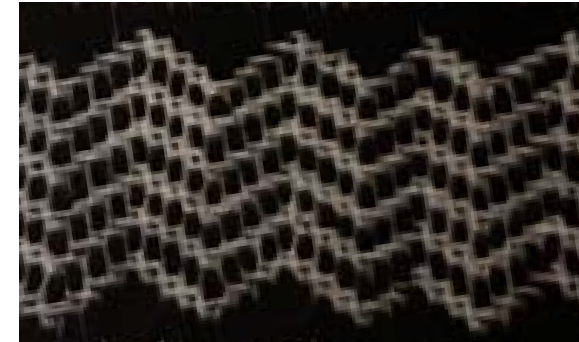
Awrrmonipoof pukhoor

It is a 6'o clock flower pattern inspired by nature. Flowers are used to denote the time of the day among which this is the most important flower, evening primrose that blooms at this time in the evening, irrespective of weather conditions.



Hpukhoor and Pell(zh)k pukhoor

This is a motif inspired by lamp pattern.



Kinazhk pukhoor

This is a pattern inspired by the hardy flowers of the Lemon-scented Thyme, which Todas call kinazhttazhky. The plant is one of the several treasures of indigenous Nilgiri flora that feature prominently in Toda culture. In this case, the Todas use the leaves for medicinal purposes; they also rub the crushed leaves onto a young buffalo calf, thus masking the animal's own odour and so permitting it to be fed by a surrogate mother. The Todas have an additional name for the kinazhk embroidery pattern-moodd no(r)sh pukhoor, 'the three-thread pattern'



Poddwa(r)shk pukhoor

In Toda, poddwa(r)shk refers to the Cobra-lily flowers that come in such striking colours and patterns in and around the sholas of the Upper Nilgiris. The pattern is said to replicate the ribbing on the spathe of the inflorescence.



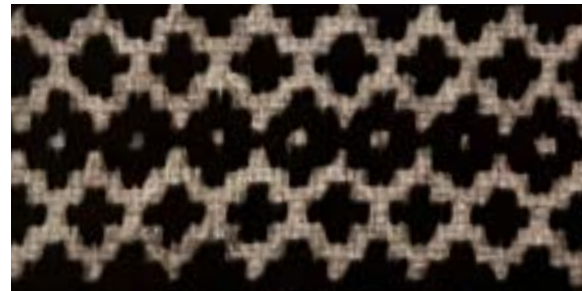
PaOt pukhoor, 'vulture pattern'



Awrr-moni-poof pukhoor, 'six o' clock flower pattern'



Ehr-kwehhdr pukhoor, 'buffalo horn pattern'



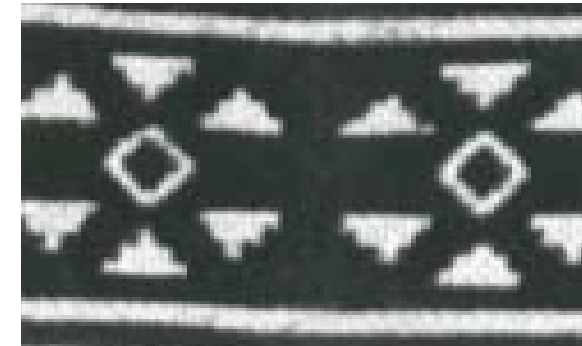
Arybettvoy pukhoor, 'crazy pattern'



'H' pukhoor and pellzh)k pukhoor, 'lamp pattern' .



Kaddoryem pukhoor, 'wristwatch pattern



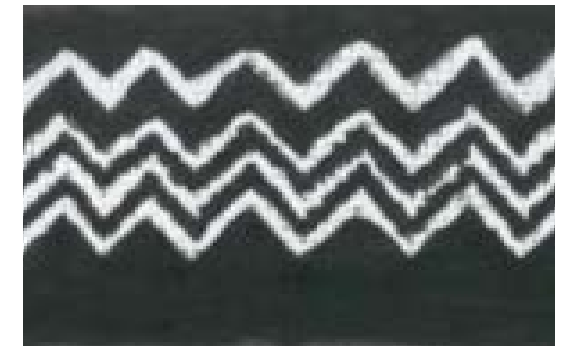
Keb Puhur (Triangle shaped design)



Pish Puhur (Cross shaped motif)



Kood Puhur (Diamond shaped motif)



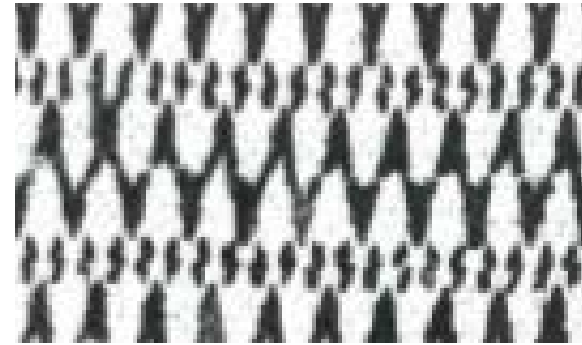
Thur Puhur (W design)



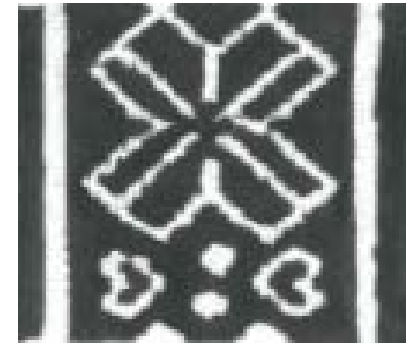
Poth Puhur (Diamond shaped designs)



Mad Puhur (Triangle shaped designs)



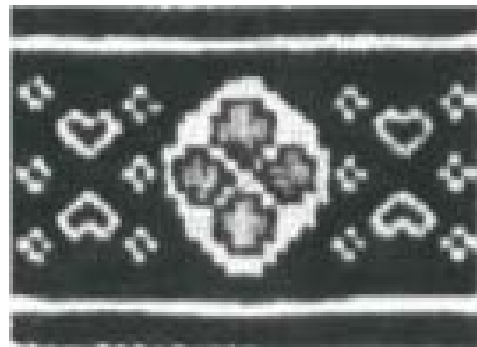
Huts (Zigzag lines)



Booth Puhur (Combination of heart shaped design and dots)



Kose Puhur (Diamond and cross)



Peesh Puhur (Heart shaped design)

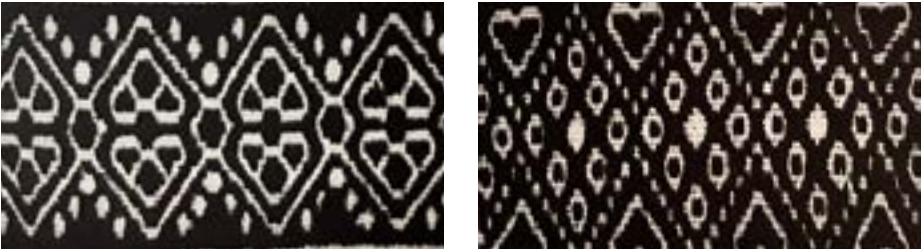


Kinask (Heart shaped designs)



Esh Puhur (Arrow shaped design)

Some other motifs:



## WORK ENVIRONMENT



Toda women work individually, sometime all the women in the mandh meet during afternoon and work together. Amid the rhythmic motions of needle and thread, they engage in heartfelt chit-chat, fostering a sense of community and shared experiences. Embroidery, therefore, becomes not only a creative outlet but also a cherished space for connection and camaraderie among these skilled makers. Most of them work in their houses or right outside their houses, they don't have workplaces. Even if they are working for the government, their work is at home. At home, they adeptly manage a myriad of responsibilities, from caring for children and cooking to washing clothes and fetching water. These diverse domestic tasks reflects their intimate connection with a broad spectrum of materials. This sensitivity often finds expression in their craft.



Source: Onsite research



Source: Onsite research

## HEALTH CONCERNS



Many women experience back pain, and a significant number also suffer from eye strain due to the intricacies involved in embroidery. Headaches are prevalent as well, stemming from the intense focus required during thread counting. Additionally, sickle cell anemia is a common health concern among the Todas, and they hold the belief that Ooth, a magical treatment, can alleviate their illnesses.

Source: Onsite research



CHAPTER 4

# THE PRODUCT



## THE POOTHUKULI

"Poothukuli", locally called "pugur", meaning flower, is a distinctive style of embroidered shawl worn by both men and women from the community. In traditional 'Poothkuli' shawl, the 'Thur' Puhur ('W' designs) motifs are placed in the middle, and borders are decorated with other designs.

It is a traditionally woven shawl which the Toda bride and groom drape themselves with the embroidered garment during weddings is used during funeral which is covered over the dead body and buried.

The coloured stripes in red and black are worn for daily use. The elderly wear this garment on daily basis.

The wedding guests too have to wear 'poothukuli' embroidered fabric during the wedding and there are incidents where those who did not wear them have been fined by the community elders.

Source: Onsite research





Front of a Poothukuli



Back of a Poothukuli

## HISTORY

Unlike other stitched garments, the shawl is such an example of the unstitched garment in the costume line which is merely used for draping the body. The shawls are embroidered skilfully to enhance the appearance of an article of dress. The word shawl (shl) comes from the Persia, means a luxurious piece of fabric like silk, wool, etc., woven into long yards to cover the body. In Hobson- Jobson Anglo-Indian dictionary of Sir Henry Yule mentions that the Persian word- shawl is perhaps of Indian origin, from Sanskrit word avala, 'variegated.'

It is usually woven in rectangular pieces, but, can also be seen in other shapes like triangular and oblong, large enough to fold and wrap around the body. These were perhaps manufactured in the Mughal and Rajputana karkhanas by skilled karigars, who were catering the monarchs as per their demands. Thereafter, the need for embroidered shawls boomed due to the excellent artistry of the artisans of that era. The shawl is a simple yet classic item of clothing which captivated not only the crowned heads but also minorities which include the tribal communities like Bhoksa, Bhotias, Santhals, Birar, Kota, Bhils and others.

Poothkuli is not just an ordinary shawl but also has social and religious significance attached to it. The Poothkuli, which is used as a shroud on funerals is known as Pekhadaar Poothkuli. It consists of two pieces of fabrics, where each piece is five meters long. Each piece is placed one above the other and stitched together lengthwise and widthwise in such a way that stitch forms 'T' shape to hold pieces at their place. The top layer is embroidered with various patterns and motifs. It is believed that the traditional motifs embroidered on the Pekhadaar Poothkuli prevent the messenger of the god of death from taking away the deceased's spirit midway on its journey to the afterworld. Also, they keep specific sacred objects in between the layers of stitched cloth which helps the spirit in their passage.



PROCESS



The material is woven in single width (86"x45"), which is plain at one end but with woven stripes of one black and two red on the other, which vernacularly known as Poothkuli, the traditional shawl of Todas. The areas between the stripes are usually filled with highly decorative embroidery.

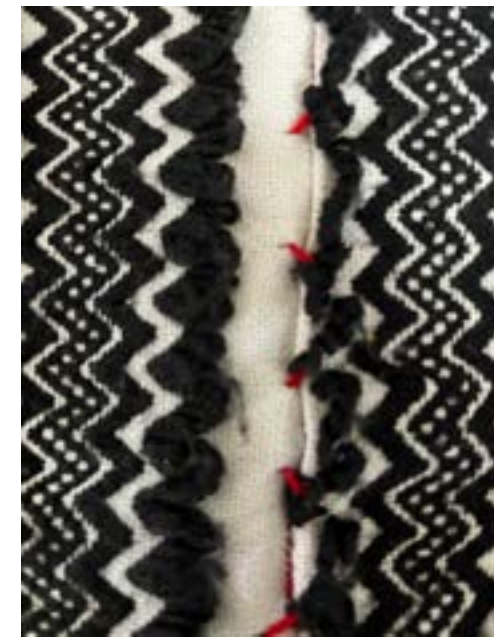
The traditional shawl uses fabric with wide bands in red at both ends on which striking geometric patterns are embroidered. It is common to find more than nine intricate designs on a single piece.

The Poothkudi contains 2 pieces which are connected horizontally then vertically. The measurements of the Poothkudi - 45 inches hip to bottom, 47 inches top to hip.

Poothukuli is mostly for Todas only as it is not of much use to others, but if its made for custom orders, it is their costliest product. They drape the shawls in that way as it helps them work comfortably.

For marriage and for a death, new poothukulis have to be made, old ones are not allowed, the motifs dont vary and people make motifs according to what they feel. They add the colour blue in their designs for a funeral.

There is also a secret pocket created while stitching the Poothukuli that they used to use during the olden days to carry food items, even now when they go shopping, they sometimes bring back items in their Poothukuli.



Pocket in a Poothukuli

## DRAPING TECHNIQUE



The Poothkuli may be worn in several different ways. The draping style of Poothkuli for men and women differ in a way that men allow the lower border to fall just below the knees, whereas women enable it to reach just above the ankles. Consequently, a man's dhoti is often partially visible under his cloak, but not in the case of women

Mostly, it is draped in such a way that the finished side faces towards the skin by covering the back, where the two ends fall on the front side of the body. The one end on the right goes over the left shoulder by covering the chest, whereas, the other end on the left goes over the right shoulder in such a manner that the embossed side falls in outward which shows decorative embroidered bands of red and black colour. Hence, both the shoulders are covered.



Draping of Poothukuli for men

The other way of draping the Poothkuli for occasions is that the one end of the shawl passes under the right armpit and then over the left shoulder. The other end on the left side goes through the right armpit once again. Thereby, keeping the right shoulder exposed.

Interestingly, for a corpse, the position of the shawl is upturned, to signify its way to the land of the dead. This reversal, with the richly embroidered areas around the coloured bands near the head, is called "Kartalmuch."



Draping of Poothukuli for women

## CONTEMPORARY PRODUCTS





Pouch







Pouch



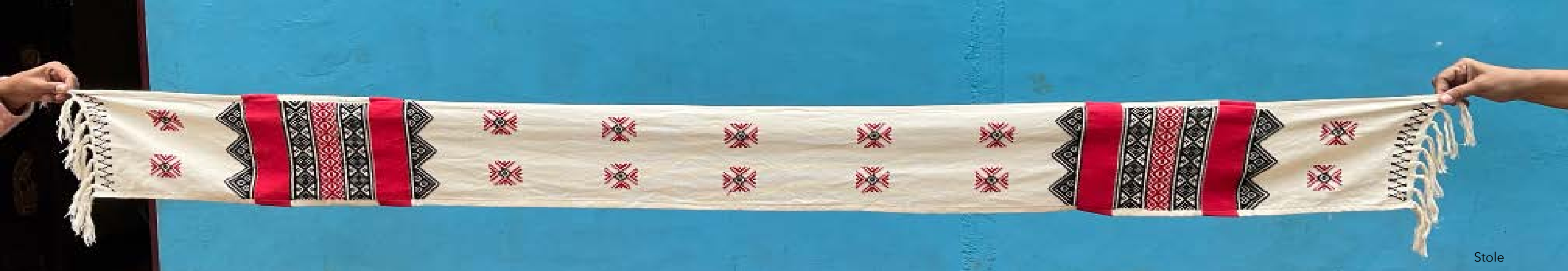
Pouch



Mobile phone holder







Stole

Today, Toda is done on pouches, cushion covers, table mats and bags. The inspiration for using this craft for developing products is the fact that this craft is depleting and at the verge of extinction. From drapes and upholstery to apparel such as kurtas, skirts, jackets, and the traditional poothukuli, Toda embroidery's rich detailing can be sighted in several items.

The dynamics have changed over time, the introduction of monetary value has transformed these traditional practices into potential sources of income for women artisans. In the present context, these skilled artisans have found new opportunities in the market. The globalization of markets, facilitated by factors like technology and increased connectivity, has allowed these artisans to sell their products to a broader audience beyond their local communities. This shift has not only brought economic independence to many women but has also allowed their traditional art forms to be appreciated and valued on a larger scale. While the economic aspect has introduced changes, it's essential to recognize the positive impact it has had on the lives of these women artisans, empowering them economically and providing a platform for the continuation of their cultural heritage. This intersection of tradition, artistry, and economic opportunity illustrates the evolving nature of cultural practices in a globalized world.





Stole



Close up of stole



Close up of dupatta



Sling bag



Handkerchief





Front of shawl



Back of shawl



Door hanging



Dhoti trim



Blouse



Front of Boys jacket



Back of Boys jacket





CHAPTER 5

# ARTISAN PROFILE





Name - Jhansi  
Living Mandu - Muthunadumandu  
Working at - Tribal Research Centre - TRC -  
Udagamandalam

Brief - She studied BA Economics in the Government art college. She has been doing Toda embroidery for many years now. Her favourite is the Vanki. She is also trying to create a new design all by herself in the process. She is currently trying to find ways to create a brand identity for the craft to provide direct payment to the artisans working in different self help groups.

Languages known - Toda, Tamil, English

Name - Poofnila  
Age - 45  
Living Mandu - Muthunadumandu  
Working at - Garden mandu or Manjakalamandu  
About - Started learning this embroidery in 9th  
grade out of interest and has continued to create  
over time, she is now the leader of her self help  
group  
Languages known - Toda , Tamil, English



Name - Nalmarani  
Living Mandu - Muthunadumandu  
Working at - Garden mandu  
About - She is the only one with a stitching machine and does all the stitching for her mandu to create the final products from the embroidered fabric given by everyone in the mandu.  
Languages known - Toda , Tamil





Name - Renuka

Age - 32

Living Mandu - Nathanarmandu

About - She has two boys. She started learning this embroidery when she was in 10th. She works at the Toda sales unit in HADP. is very proficient at this embroidery that she can complete 2 mufflers in one week. Her favourite motif is Sun Phookar.

Languages known - Toda, Tamil, English

Name - Nathiya sin  
Age - 38  
Living Mandu - Nathanar mandu  
Working at - Toda emporium by TN government  
About - She has been working here for the last  
10 years. She has 1 boy and 1 girl and both are in  
their first year of college.  
Languages known - English, Malayalam, Toda,  
Tamil, Badga





Name - Ambikasin

Age - 40

About - She was married at 18 and has been practicing Toda since the age of 14. Her daughter is doing UG in Nirmala college and son has done BSc and also part time sports coaching. She is Hindu.

Languages known - Tamil Toda baduga Kannada English

Name - Reetasin  
Age - 39  
Living Mandu - Muthandumandu  
Brief - She has 5 daughters and her eldest  
daughter knows Toda embroidery. Her favourite  
Toda embroidery is pisch pukhoor.  
Languages known - Tamil Toda





Name - Muthakili  
Age - 46  
Living Mandu - Coonoor nedimandu  
Languages known - Toda tamil english

Name - Pavithra

Age - 35 years

About - She has been doing the embroidery for 13 years. Her favourite Toda embroidery stitch is Modir puhor. She along with Jhansi and others in her self help group are working on creating a system of direct payments to the self help groups.

Languages known - Tamil, Toda, Hindi, English



MARKET



They sell through outlets in many places around Nilgiirs and through other outlets in Co-optex and other government shops. Also, for all their tribes, programmes and cultural activities, exhibitions are put up selling the products of these tribes.

Many NGOs buy their products for a low price and sell for higher prices because of which the TRC makes sure that whenever there is an opportunity the immediately set up stalls for the tribes for them to get a platform to showcase and sell their products for a duration of generally 3-4 days, where they get to keep all the money they get.

The embroidered fabric is a huge hit among the foreigners who visit Ooty, which is a tourist spot and is sold from Rs 5,000 and above. Tourists are their biggest market. Government shops sell the products reasonably but latest creations are seen only at the Mandu shops.

They also customize orders for customers these days.  
Recently the youth are contemplating a website through which they get orders.  
They also sell through the shop in the garden mandu.

Earlier, they used to travel to many places for exhibitions and sell their products. But now after getting the GI Tag they are getting many orders directly and they courier the orders everywhere in the world.



# PRICE OF PRODUCTS

To make the embroidery products, the Toda women buy the cream coloured, red striped mat weave material that comes from Erode Salem to Tirupur at Rs. 370 per metre. Black acrylic is 30 to 50 rupees and red acrylic is 30 to 50 rupees and the needle cost is Rs. 5.

Dupattas takes 22 days to make and cost price is 300, the selling price Rs.1800 they make about Rs 700 - 1000.

A shawl takes 30 days, the selling price is 3000 and they get profit about Rs.1300.  
A money purse takes 3 days to make and the cost is Rs 350 along with Rs.50 for stitching.  
Two mufflers is equal to one dupatta.

Price list of a few items:

- Shawl - Selling Price - Rs 2200, Cost price - Rs 1100
- Muffler - Selling Price - Rs 800, Cost price - Rs 450
- Stole - Selling Price - Rs 1500, Cost price - Rs 800
- Poothkuli - Selling Price - Rs 10,000, Cost price - Rs 8,000



## MARKET CHALLENGES

Challenges persist for practitioners of Toda embroidery, including issues such as inadequate compensation when working for organizations, limited technical knowledge hindering entrepreneurial aspirations, and the desire for direct recognition and payment for self-help groups. Establishing a distinct brand identity poses a difficulty due to the craft's Geographical Indication (GI) tag.

The Todas were affected by a NGO who hired a few of them under the pretext of helping them get united but slowly they felt they were getting exploited. The NGO uses machines and due to their usage, they mass produce their products and sell a shawl that is usually sold for much less at a higher price. To fight against this, the Todas decided to form Self Help Groups and do the sales for the products they produced, by themselves. Now, women in their families are educated have understood the situation and the negative impact of this on their craft. This has also led to a collective decision that Toda tribes are not allowed to teach anyone the craft or give out pictures of the different motifs and samples available to researchers as it is a threat to their authenticity.

There are about 25 self-help groups who can get bank loans as get capital for embroidery loans. But they have to make profits otherwise they may not get loans again. Government staff cannot be part of self - help groups.

While technology offers new educational avenues, the revival of this craft may benefit from increased exhibits, interactions, and efforts by governmental and non-governmental institutions, designers, and experts. Repositioning the embroidery as a relevant, modern-day rendition of its historical roots could potentially enhance its impact.

They have several needs and aspirations, including the desire to teach tribe members weaving skills, particularly men, who have not shown interest so far. Concerns about the quality of purchased cloth affecting the final design have emerged. Recently, embracing modern payment systems, such as Google Pay and PayTm, using QR codes, demonstrates their adaptability to contemporary methods.



# GOVERNMENT POLICIES

The Textile Committee of the Ministry of Textiles, a governmental body, is responsible for inspecting and ensuring the quality of embroidery. Todas receive support from the Tamil Nadu Government and various NGOs to promote and market their embroidered products.

The 'Toda's Handicraft Sale Emporium,' managed by the Tamil Nadu Government, plays a crucial role in marketing these embroidered products.

The government sells products at a lower price compared to self-help groups.

Example: If a shawl's selling price is Rs.800, Rs.400 is taken by the government, Rs.200 is the cost price and only Rs.200 is given to the artisan.

Under the 'Ambedkar Hastashilp Vikas Yogana (AHVY) scheme by the Office of the Development Commissioner (Handicrafts), Ministry of Textiles, Government of India, Toda embroidery has undergone transformations.

Traditional craft has expanded to include diversified products like shoulder bags, picture frames, notebooks, and various designs.

The Nilgiri Adivasi Welfare Association (NAWA) actively engages in promotional activities to inspire Toda women in creating embroidered products. With expertise in marketing, design development, handicraft exhibitions, and promotional activities, NAWA contributes to empowering Toda women and preserving the art of Toda embroidery.



Source: Onsite research



Source: Onsite research

# EFFECT OF GEOGRAPHICAL INDICATION TAG

This handicraft product is listed as a geographically tagged product and is protected under the Geographical Indications of Goods Act (GI Act) 1999 of the Government of India. It was registered by the Controller General of Patents Designs and Trademarks under the title “Toda Embroidery” and recorded at GI Application number 135 under Class 24, Class 25, and Class 26 as Textiles and Textile Goods, clothing, and Embroidery, respectively, in March 2013. A certificate of the GI registration was formally presented to the community leaders in June 2013. This was first initiated in 2008 and the agencies who supported this registration are the Toda Nalavaazhvu Sangam, Keystone Foundation, and Poompuhar.

Toda embroidery got GI (Geographical Identification) in September 2013. GI is a sign used on goods that have a specific geographical origin and possess qualities, reputation or characteristic that can be attributed to that place of origin. The GI registration was a great help for the marketing of the product. Earlier, they used to sell to only foreigners who visited them. But now after the GI tag, people all around India have started to create orders for Toda embroidery work. Also, they used to use every opportunity to showcase their work through SHG and travel to sell their work but after GI, people contact them and they don’t have to run around much. With the help of recent “slow fashion” movements, the art has reached platforms that will help more designers notice it. Now they have started all custom order tops and kurtis and now they do the embroidery around curves also. They have a geographical indication tag in many countries. The self help groups get funding solely because of the geographical tag.

Dr Chabbra started the Toda Nalvaazhu Sangham and worked for a GI tag for the Toda embrodiery along with another Nilgiri-based NGO, Keystone Foundation and the state handicraft development corporation, Poompuhar. The GI status will go a long way in ensuring that the Toda’s heritage is preserved and that the embroidery gets a good price on the market. This would ensure that the imaginative and excellent work done by women like Vangamalli, Anasinpuff, Thegamma and Puvzed get their due recognition.

प्रारूप O-2

बौद्धिक सम्पदा भारत

भारत सरकार

GOVERNMENT OF INDIA

भौगोलिक उपदर्शन रजिस्ट्री

Geographical Indication Registry

वस्तुओं का भौगोलिक उपदर्शन (रजिस्ट्रीकरण तथा संरक्षण) अधिनियम, 1999

Geographical Indication of goods (Registration and Protection) Act, 1999

भौगोलिक उपदर्शन संख्या:

Geographical Indication No.: 135

CERTIFICATE NO: 187

प्राधिकृत उपयोग संख्या

Authorized user No.:

दिनांक

Date: 11.09.2008

प्रमाणित किया जाता है कि भौगोलिक उपदर्शन (जिसकी समयावधि इससे साथ समाप्त है) / प्राधिकृत उपयोग

के नाम से

द्वारा

संख्या के अंतर्गत

दिनांक को

के लिए रजिस्टर में रजिस्ट्रीकृत किया गया है।

Certified that the Geographical Indication (of which a representation is annexed hereto)/ authorized user has been registered in the register in the name of Toda Nalvaazhvu Sangam, Hospital Road, Ootacamund - 643 001, Nilgiris District, Tamil Nadu, India; Keystone Foundation, Keystone Centre, P. B. 35, Groves Hill Road, Kotagiri - 643217, Nilgiris District, Tamil Nadu, India, and Tamil Nadu Handicrafts Development Corporation, ("Poompuhar") at No 739, Anna Salai, Chennai - 600 002, Tamil Nadu, India.

in class 24, 25 & 26 under no. 135

in respect of "TODA EMBROIDERY"

as of the date 11.09.2008

Falling in Class - 24 in respect of - Textiles & Textiles goods, not included in other Classes;

Class - 25 in respect of - Clothing;

Class - 26 in respect of - Lace and Embroidery.

आप्त दिनांक

माह

20

को चेन्नई में मेरे निदेश पर मुद्रांकित किया गया।

Scaled at my direction, this 04

day of March

20 13

at Chennai,

रजिस्ट्रार, भौगोलिक उपदर्शन

Registrar of Geographical Indication.



# PRESENT DAY SCENARIO



Nowadays, they have started adding crystals and embellishments to make their products more appealing. Toda embroidery finds itself incorporated in many spheres such as table cloths, cushions, mats, bedspreads, shawls, tunics, dupattas, skirts, bags, and even Christmas decorations.

They get their cloth from Ooty market that comes from Karoor and Tirupur. The black and red stripes come woven and stitched to the cloth. It is acrylic wool. All the women feel that they should learn weaving, so that the need to get cloth from Karoor and Tirupur would stop and they could weave the way they want for different designs in the future. Initial investment would be high but eventually they might make better profits. As the women do the embroidery, they hope the men can learn weaving to help them out with making the base cloth.

Before only poothkuli used to exist, now they have many products like salwar, sarees and blouses They just needed measurements, otherwise after production is complete they courier the items to the customer. Earlier they used to wear silver jewellery. Now they wear all kinds of jewellery.

A general feeling is that there is no respect for the crafts of India. They recently got an opportunity to put up an exhibition in the US but when a similar thing was proposed in India by the self help groups and the tribal research centre, it was looked down upon.

Many youth of the current generation are sportspersons exhibiting their talents in state and national-level tournaments. But they are also aware of their tradition and culture and learn the Toda embroidery right from their young age by watching elders at home. Though most of the women who get educated either get married or get a job outside of Ooty and are not interested in taking the craft forward.

For people in the cities, they think of the Todas as tribes and adivasis living in the forests. But when they visit they realise now even they live like others.

Toda embroidery designs has reached multiple universities, including ones abroad, and people usually use these designs as print (as seen in the market challenges page) after asking them what their new designs are for sarees and home furnishing needs.



## AWARDS AND RECOGNITIONS

The NariShaktiPuraskar was awarded to Jaya Muthu and Tejamma from Tharnarmandu for their contribution in preserving and promoting the age-old Toda Embroidery of the Nilgiris.

The embroidery also got a lot of recognition after MK Stalin was adorned with a Toda shawl during an event.



## MY EXPERIENCE

Embarking on the craft documentation project in Ooty, focusing on the Toda people's embroidery with just two colors of acrylic wool on woven matty cloth, became a transformative journey for me. The emotional connection to Ooty, my maternal grandmother's birthplace, added a personal layer to the experience, making it more than just a documentation project.

With permission from the Tribal Research Centre, I found myself in the lap of nature's luxury in the Nilgiris. The breathtaking views of bluish mountain ranges, the pleasant climate, and the bustling life of the hill town painted a vivid backdrop. Interacting with the Toda people revealed a warmth and accommodation that went beyond answering questions - it was an invitation into their lives.

The discovery of the Toda people's reverence for buffaloes, their unique embroidery technique with no reverse side to the cloth, and the significance of the Poothukuli garment left a lasting impact. Witnessing their fast-paced embroidery, their lilting voices during singing, and their commitment to protecting their homeland showcased a deep connection to nature and community.

This experience transcended a mere craft documentation project, becoming an engagement with a new culture. I delved into their lives, learning about their dreams, aspirations, and fears. The Toda people's simple living and high thinking philosophy resonated deeply with me. I became more than a spectator; I became part of their story.

As a designer, this journey made me immensely empathetic. Understanding the intricacies of their craft and lifestyle shaped not only my approach to design but also my perspective on cultural sensitivity. It reinforced the importance of not just creating aesthetically pleasing designs but designs that respect and resonate with the rich cultural narratives they represent.



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