

Jaypore	The Hindu	21.05.2024	National	How Ooty's Todas capture flowers, hills, and streams on a shawl
---------	-----------	------------	----------	---

[How Ooty's Todas capture flowers, hills, and streams on a shawl](#)

My white Toda shawl featuring red and black embroidered wild flowers, honeycombs, streams, and mountain peaks flutters in the cool breeze. I clutch it as I walk barefoot across the rolling meadows to Manjalkad Mund, a Toda village set in the [Botanical Gardens](#) in Udhagamandalam.

The *mund* is home to about 25 Toda families; one of the oldest indigenous tribes of the Nilgiris. The [Toda population](#) is estimated to be around 1,700, scattered across 60 hamlets.

Pethai Kuttan, a 60-year-old Toda retraces their history while we enjoy coffee at his home. Sai Lakshmisin, his wife and Nirupasin, his daughter-in-law, both wearing *poothukuli* (the Toda shawl) discuss the intricate embroidery, which was given [GI status](#) in 2013.

The shawl is now available online at Jaypore, an artisanal lifestyle brand from Aditya Birla Fashion and Retail (ABFRL). Discussing how they have been working with the community for the past three years to popularise the intricately-embroidered shawls, Sooraj Bhat, CEO, Ethnic Business, ABFRL says that through the association, they not only showcase the craftsmanship of Toda artisans but also honour their cultural legacy. The brand engages in a direct purchasing model for these shawls and stoles, which sell at a starting price of about ₹ 3,250 onwards, and Sooraj says that online sales have been consistent.

“As the Toda craft is highly specialised and practised exclusively within the community for centuries, there haven’t been an extensive skill development initiative or collaborations with external designers yet. Given its niche nature, the intricate embroidery techniques and designs are uniquely preserved and passed down through generations within the Toda tribe,” explains Sooraj.

The Toda women are the custodians of the distinctive, black and red embroidery. At every *mund* we visit, such as the Taranad Mund on the Udhagamandalam-Mysore highway and Muthunad Mund (nine kilometres off Udhagamandalam, the motherland from where the Todas are believed to have originated), we see Toda women, seated on the grasslands, usually under the shade of a large tree, and engaged in their art while singing full-throated songs that talk of damp grass, warm sunlight, and mountain air. Some of the lyrics are haunting, including one that goes ‘What life has in store is not our choice but up to the will of destiny and Nature. ‘

“We take pride in spending hours to achieve perfection in embroidery,” says Sathyaneedhi, 64, as she works at Taranad Mund. Guided by deft fingers, she counts the threads of the base coarse cotton fabric, traditionally white, beige or cream, as she recreates Nature-inspired motifs (*pukhoor*) of the Toda landscape, wild flowers of the sholas, butterflies, and mountains

The Toda artisans work on the reverse side of the cloth and the patterns emerge on the front giving it an embossed effect. As the design is entirely reversible, one can use/display both sides. Nirupasin gives a quick demo on how the artisans count the thread with their fingers by merely stretching the material as she deftly weaves my initials on the shawl.

Some motifs use zigzag lines called ‘hutz’ while ‘booth puhur’ is a combination of hearts and dots done on the border, and ‘esh puhur’ are arrow-shaped designs. Geometric shapes, including diamonds, triangles and hearts are vastly seen.

“*Poothukuli* is a must during our festivities. During funeral rituals, the dead are wrapped in one. It takes months to weave one shawl. Traditionally, both men and women wear it, draped around one’s back in a way that the embellished end is brought to the front over the right shoulder, then over the left shoulder once again,” says Laskhmisin over a hearty lunch of *portor* (mushy rice cooked in milk and jaggery) and *otnitor* (mashed

rice) served with a dollop of butter and a tangy, spicy red chutney and a stir-fry made with carrots plucked from her backyard. Discussing the grandeur of the signature embroidery, Laskhmisin, who brings four decades of expertise to her craft, adds that no two shawls are alike. “Every single piece is a collector’s item.”

As we prepare to leave, Pongyaripoo, a 90-year-old Toda woman wrapped in a *poothukuli*, gives us a toothless grin and talks of her love for embroidery that now finds itself on cushion covers, garments, mobile pouches and tote bags making the product more saleable. She adds, “A pattern — diamond waves, forest, or floral — appears in our mind’s eye and is then stitched onto fabric, leaving no room for error.”