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Nature-inspired motifs The Toda women are the custodians of the distinctive, black and red embroidery. NAVALDEEP THAREJA AND SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Weaving Toda threads

Artisanal lifestyle brand Jaypore collaborates with the Todas of the Nilgiris to popularise their GI-tagged, embroidered shawls

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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 Lakshminis, his wife and Nirupasin, his

daughter-in-law, both wearing *poothukuli* (the Toda shawl) discuss the intricate embroidery, which was awarded a GI tag 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 these 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 ₹3,250, 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," he explains.

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-Mysuru 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, under the shade of a large tree, 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

