



Poothkuli- The Indigenous Shawl of Toda

Garima Sharma

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 (shawl) 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 *shāvala*, '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 Rajputanakhans 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 so on. These tribes are dispersed through length and breadth of India with a chequered and intriguing history along with a promising textile heritage.

Among the following, Toda is one such tribe which are inhabitants of Nilgiri hills in Tamil Nadu. This community has a unique lifestyle and rich traditions with biggest conundrums. They are picturesque people with impressive figures, sharp features, keen eyes and the long ringlets, coupled with a Toga-like garment. It has been witnessed that their way of dressing is similar to the Mediterranean people.

The Toga-like garment is made from the unbleached coarsely woven white cotton cloth whose warps and wefts are easily countable, which is very important for the production of the Toda embroidery patterns. 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 (Figure 1). The areas between the stripes are usually filled with highly decorative embroidery.

Retention of the authenticity of this embroidery is necessary for the survival of their cultural and tribal identity. Hence there is a need to preserve and patent *Poothkuli* and bring its richness to the outside world. The present study aims to unravel the exquisite embroidered textile of Toda community with aforethought to look at the iconography, origin, construction, material, designs of the *Poothkuli* supported with photographs, line diagrams and schematic images of the technique used in embroidery for rendering motifs.



Figure 1: Poothkuli – The Indigenous shawl of Toda, Photo Courtesy: Author

Methodology

The present study aimed to identify the original features of craft and the changes that had taken place to revive the craft in its conventional form and character. 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 60 Toda settlements settled in the Nilgiri District. According to the 1994 report from the Tribal Research Center, the Todas have occupied 54 settlements in Ootacamund consisting of 219 households, five settlements in kotagiri consisting of 23 households and one settlement in Coonoor consisting of 7 households. The study was limited to settlement residing in and around Ootacamund town of Nilgiris district.
- **Sample selection:** A sample size of 32 Toda artisan were chosen from the Ootacamund region. The sample size solely included Toda women who have been practicing this embroidery for at least 8-10 years and from the age range of 25-75 years. This homogeneity in sample selection helped in gaining intuitiveness into the history and origin of the tribe and their art forms through their experience and knowledge.
- **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, NGOs, and people associated with this tribal craft. The sources of information were: i) National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT) library, New Delhi, ii) The National Museum, New Delhi, iii) AadimJatiSanghraya, New Delhi, iv) Lalit Kala Academy, New Delhi, v) Sanskriti Museum, Gurugram (Haryana), vi) Tribal Museum and Research Center, Muthorai Palada (Ooty) and personal collection of people engaged in this needlecraft.
- **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.

Results and Discussion

The 'Poothkuli' is the traditional shawl of Todas. It is riveting red, black and white shawl bearing intricately embroidered geometric patterns that are graphically impressive and symbolically rich. The Poothkuli is elaborately embroidered and this unique embroidery style known as 'pugur' or 'pukhoor' in Toda dialect. Here, the word 'pugur' or 'pukhoor' stands for a motif. The embroidery is done on loosely woven white cotton fabric using red and black thick woolen threads with a metal needle. The thickness of the threads ensures that the pattern is finished with an embossed look. These colours are symbolic of their cultural beliefs. The white colour base indicates purity and innocence, red colour depicts adolescence and youth and the black colour is the symbol of maturity. These colours best represent their identity, the power and the significance of their traditional shawl. This embroidery is exquisitely carried out by the womenfolk of the community. Young girls also begin to assist their elders as soon as they can handle the needle.



Figure2: The draping style of Poothkuli for men (A) and women (B) Photo Courtesy: Author

Poothkuli is not just an ordinary shawl but also has social and religious significance attached to it. It is worn on all important social occasions. The Toda bride and groom drape themselves with the embroidered garment during the weddings, and even the dead are covered with a newly embroidered shawl before the funeral rights are performed. 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.

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 (Figure 2). 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.

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*."

Embroidery Patterns and Technique

This tribal embroidery is an expression of beauty and aesthetics which women of Toda tribe renders on fabric with needle and threads. It is done on calculation, and the finished product shows off the intricate patterns which are beautifully embroidered with colourful threads using the darning stitch that seemingly integrate with the whole cloth. Darning stitch is executed from the back side of the base cloth. The artisans use their fingers to stretch the base cloth for clear visibility, counting, and picking-up of threads. After counting of threads, small stitches are taken with a needle at short distances. These small stitches move back and forth consecutively. The embroidery follows the warp and weft threads of the coarsely woven base cloth. Therefore the designs evolved are geometric and appears very similar to the woven patterns. With each turn of stitch, a loop is left, to create a thick line and rich texture which forms the

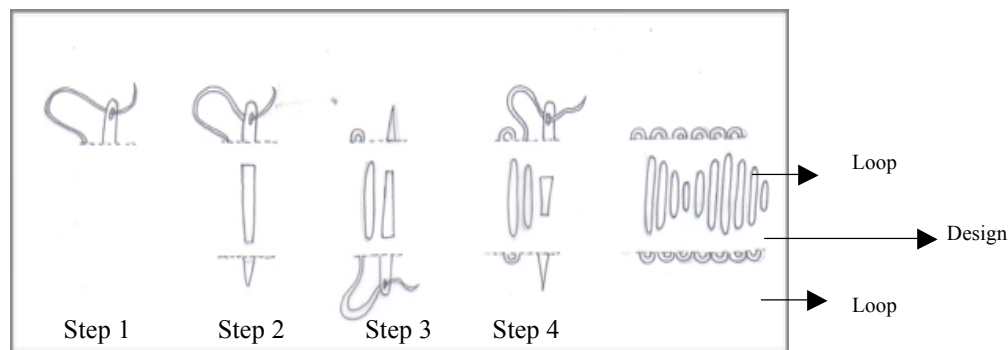


Figure3: The Technique of Embroidery Photo Courtesy: Author

What is more remarkable about these Indigenous Toda Women is that without any modern aids like scales, patterns and in the absence of numerical literacy, they skilfully embroider patterns with such a geometric precision. Another interesting aspect of this embroidery which distinguishes it from other embroideries is that it is reversible and one can use on either side. The reverse side of the *poothkuli* is equally beautiful with no signs of hanging loose threads and knots (Figure 4). Due to their exceptional workmanship and vibrant imagination and thoughts which remained undamaged by urbanized lifestyles made the exclusive embroidery one.

The motifs incorporated in the embroidery are geometric, and the inspiration is derived from the nature, day-to-day activities, mythological stories and the colours of flora and fauna of Nilgiris. The mountains of the Nilgiris have inspired the '*twedhhr*,' the stripes pattern on the squirrel's body conferred to '*peshk*,' '*kopaan*' is inspired by the chequered pattern on the butterfly wings and a beehive has inspired the '*Kwudrkorr*,' and yellow marsh flowers have given form to '*modhery*' and so on. The most commonly used embroidery pattern is the *Ocvett Pukhoor* which is used on the edges of the shawl to prevent the fabric from fraying. It has taken its inspiration from the striped cane braiding technique employed in the construction of Toda temples. *Ehpothillykhmpukhoor* is also one such pattern used for finishing of edges, inspired by ears of the rabbits, which are omnipresent in the forest of Nilgiris. Toda women who were keen observers started this embroidery tradition. They observed the techniques employed by Toda men in the construction of traditional Toda structures like huts and temples. The menfolk used long stripes of rattan to tie-down various components of traditional structures to provide stability. Later on, all this became the inspiration for Toda women to visualize patterns and execute them on their *poothkuli*. The patterns reflect the creativity of the Toda women who conjure up a pattern in their minds and then transfer it to the piece of cloth. Symbolic communication has been one of the essential criteria for this embroidery. The designs essentially invoke or arouse an association that conveys a particular meaning. The meaning expressed through symbols may range from a small matter of fact, everyday details to the concept of universal importance such as gods and spirit world.

At present, where the modern designs have replaced the traditional ones, the Toda is one such community that they still believe in stitching the traditional ones. There are more than fifteen traditional designs and variety of other motifs which are either modified version of the traditional pattern or a new variation of the previous one. *Twehhdrukhoor* is one such oldest surviving example which can be seen in *Poothkuli*. It means 'the pattern in pairs.' This pattern is incorporated in the *PekhadaarPoothkuli* because the community believes that their journey to the afterworld will be unhindered by all means. Presently, this motif is known as 'The big pattern.' A grid-based sketch of *Twehhdrukhoor* describes the technique of carrying out a *Pukhoor* or an embroidery pattern.



Figure 4: (from left to right) Recto and Verso of a *Poothkuli*, Photo Courtesy: Author



Figure 5: (from left to right) Tweddhrukhoor, grid based sketch of Tweddhrukhoor

In the above figure 5, the black boxes represent the stitches that are visible on the front, and the white boxes represent stitches where the thread passes on the back. The areas marked as 'A' at the top and bottom of each vertical row, the stitch forms an unusual loose loop that the Toda women employ at the ends of a pukhoor for an embossed effect. It is precisely due to this loop stitch that the Toda prefer this embossed side as the recto and finished side as verso. The areas labeled as 'B' stands for reversed stitch where a thread is carried to the back, and the digit that follows denotes the number of threads the embroiderer counts before reinserting the needle. Similarly, 'C' stands for front stitches that the needle takes on the front side of the cloth, and the numeral that follows denotes the number of threads counted. All divisions designated as 'B' are therefore seen as white gaps or blank spaces on the front but as thread pattern on the back, and the black boxes on the front depict stitches on the front and gaps on the back. The 'loops in front' begins, continues and ends the embroidery process.

There is one front loop before the first reverse stitch and another one after the last reverse stitch of each vertical row, and this front loop is then extended over to the next row. These loops are seen on the front side, where it forms a thick line as a border to form a pattern. Each vertical row consists of a pair of threads. Row 1 is worked beginning at the bottom, and row 2 is worked in the opposite direction, row 3 again start from the bottom so on and so forth. After row 11, rows 2 to 11 are repeated to make rows 12 to 21, and this sequence is continued to achieve the desired length of the pattern.

Given below are some of the other motifs and their visual representation on the grid-based sketch.

ModheryPukhoor: This motif is inspired by the 'Mat Plant' which grows in the marshy areas of Nilgiris as large clumps with distinctively stiff and spiky flowers. It is known as the 'mat' pattern in the local dialect (Figure 6).

PeershPukhoor: This design is most attractive and accessible pattern. It is inspired by the rays of the sun which falls on the Toda huts and other buildings. Symbols of the sun are often represented in carved from on Toda huts and temples, and have, somewhat naturally; this is included in Toda embroidery patterns. A Toda hut is sometimes embroidered along with this pattern to make it look more natural (Figure 7).

AwkhofeihrshyPukhoor: This motif is inspired by the 'V' shaped patterns on the body of a cobra. The Toda consider cobras as sacred and protector of their dairy temples. It is believed that these cobras gather in groups in the dairy temples which have been left unused for a more extended period. The cobra motif is embroidered on two parallel sides with a presence of another pattern in the centre. This motif is sometimes intricately combined with other patterns to achieve reasonably complex-looking designs similar to tapestries (Figure 8).

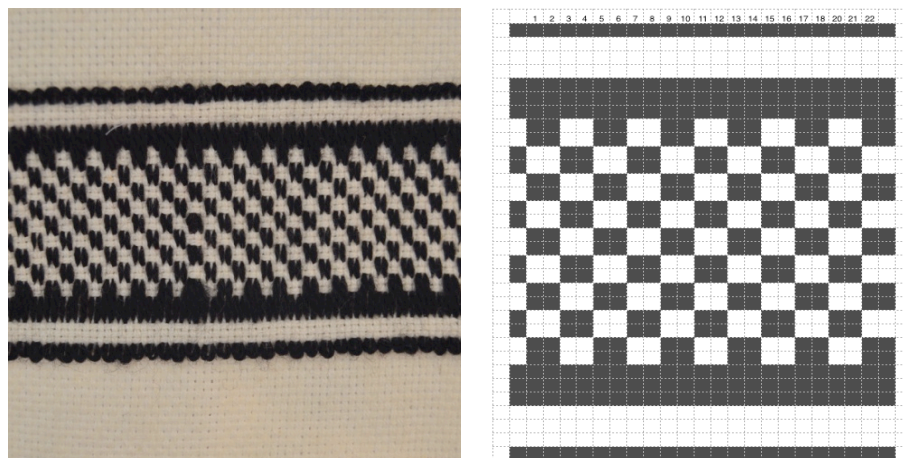


Figure 6: (from left to right) *Modherypukhoor*, grid based sketch of *Modherypukhoor* Courtesy: Author



Figure 7: (from left to right) *Peershpukhoor*, grid-based sketch of *Peershpukhoor* Courtesy: Author

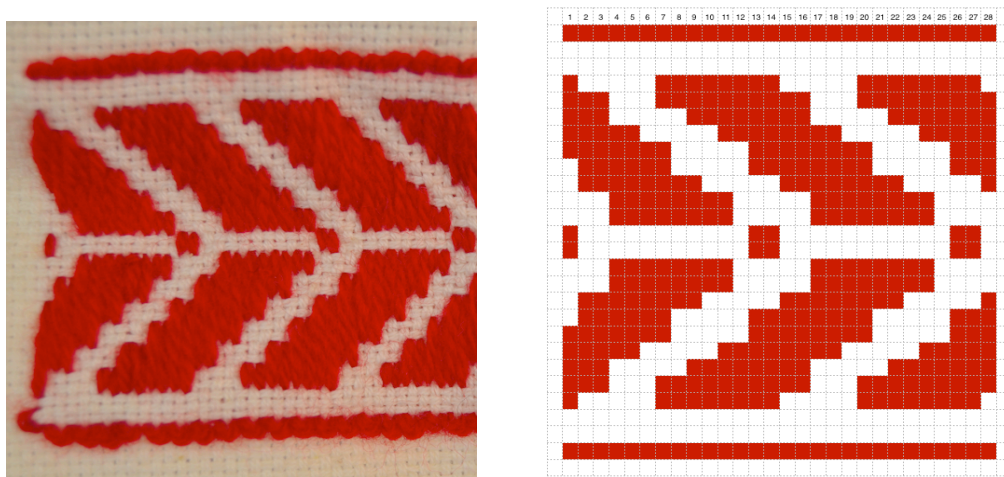


Figure 8: (from left to right) *Awkhofeihhrshypukhoor*, grid-based sketch of *Awkhofeihhrshypukhoor* Courtesy: Author

Conclusion

Poothkuli, an exquisitely embroidered shawl of the Toda, beautifully reflect the flora and fauna and other natural beauties of Nilgiris. Nowadays, most of the people of Toda community wear *poothkuli* adorned with a variety of patterns that are mostly modern; there are also one or two old ones. Toda patterns are uniquely traditional & contemporary at the same time. This embroidery is an excellent example of an aesthetic form of expression that has an appeal that goes beyond a distinctive culture, verging on the global. Its characteristic geometric style, dramatic flow & colour contrasts have echoes in design traditions of early cultures in other parts of the globe.

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About the Author

Garima Sharma ,Textile Conservator, The City Palace Museum, Udaipur