

POOTHUKULY

THE TODA CEREMONIAL SHAWL

The Toda Ceremonial Shawl that reflects the Embroidery Tradition of an Ancient Pastoral People



TODA SHAWLS

Though a shawl is a common utility feature in most traditional communities, it often also has family, community, cultural, social & religious significance. For example in some communities the designs, colours & motifs on the Shawls signify the family status of the wearer, in others – rites of passage such as marriage, priestly ordination & death are marked. Then there are 'honour shawls' like those that the Ao Nagas award to Battle Heroes. Across the Indian sub-continent, the colours of shawls vary, as do the designs & symbols. Most of them of course are hand woven with designs & motifs painted, patched or embroidered on one side.

The Todas have a traditional shawl that they call the Poothukuly – a dramatic red, black & white wrap – over bearing intricately embroidered geometric patterns that are graphically impressive & symbolically rich.

The Todas are an ancient pastoral people who live in the cool uplands of the Nilgiri Mountains of Tamil Nadu. They were once owners of vast herds of Buffaloes that grazed the extensive temperate grasslands. Their economic, religions, cultural & community life is based on this pastoral being, inextricably linked to their life, death & after life. The Nilgiris, according to the Todas, is where the entire tribe & its various clans were created. It is also the place of their existence and afterlife. Because of this, the entire region is a sacred space for them. In fact every hundred yards of land has a special name endowing the natural environment with a powerful symbolic presence. Flowers, Fruits, Trees, Grasses, Animals, Birds, Rivers, Streams hills & Valleys all play a significant role in the life of the community & figure in their ancient lore, their songs & stories. Images on the Poothukuly represent many of these elements, becoming the most significant social, community and ceremonial garment they possess.



PEOPLE WEARING TODA SHAWLS

The Poothukuly is no ordinary shawl. It consists of two five meter lengths of fabric which are embroidered with similar patterns & motifs and joined together [lengthwise] to increase the width of the shawl to more than a meter. Tucked in between the fold of cloth is a pocket that is used to store valuables. Before it is worn, it is folded in half [for warmth] & covering the left shoulder is wrapped around the back & held under the right arm, then slung over the left shoulder. The sections that are visible along the shoulders & back are usually richly embroidered.

This shawl is worn by men & women at all important social occasions. A newly embroidered shawl is preferred for weddings and the designs and motifs on these are all related to prosperity, fertility & security. A newly embroidered shawl is also used as a shroud during funerals. It is called a Pekhadaar Poothukuly. The inside pocket in this one is used to keep certain sacred objects which will help the spirit of the person in the other world. In addition to this the designs & motifs on its surface all relate to the guiding elements and forces that will help the spirit along on its journey to Amunore, the land of the dead. This journey is as significant as life's journey.

The spirit once it leaves the body travels from Mulli Mund, over land towards Amunore, over densely wooded hills, across streams & waterfalls, past Mettine Karsh [Steps of Stone], Koche Arre [Bangle Rock], Ovvunni Karsh, Maenbaem, Kojji Kochith Koer – the stream where the spirits from Amunore come to meet the new arrivals, Tharsfole Karsh – and on & on until the spirit reaches Pooverikaene, the Bubbling Stream. There's a rope strung across the stream. The spirit has to cross, walking along this rope. If it has not lived a just life, it will fall into the stream & a sacred buffalo will offer its horn to rescue the drowning person. But if the spirit fails to climb out, it will have to wait one year. There are only three chances. If it fails all three, the corridors to Amunore close forever for that person. But if the spirit succeeds, it is truly liberated from all the rites and practices and shastras of Toda life on earth and it travels on to Amunore. The Land of the Dead.



TODA SHAWLS USED IN FESTIVALS

On the Pekhdaar Poothukuly some of the symbolic natural elements of this journey are depicted in graphic representation. So subtle is the Toda life of seeing and deciphering.

Earliest Poothukuly was made from white fabric which was brought up from either the Tamil Nadu or the Karnataka plains & the embroidery on its surface was blue. This doesn't mean that it lacked either the intricate design or the symbolic motifs. They were all present, except of course in far subtler forms. However, the significance of the shawl has always been the same. Innumerable stories, songs & sacred chants that have come down to us through the ages feature the Poothukuly in various contexts.



As time changed the Todas were faced by either settlers drifting into the region or encountered displaced hunting & gathering communities seeking refuge on higher grounds. In those times, the need was perhaps felt to resort to all manner of protection against the intrusion & threat. Gradually, protective mystic symbols began appearing on the Poothukuly. And as for the shift from blue to red & black, there are many theories. Two seem the most plausible. The first is that when the Todas were exposed to the diversity of colour & design of incoming settlers they absorbed new influences. The colours that symbolize assertiveness and it could very well be that their vulnerability in the face of change theories includes one that claims a European Settler introduced red & black to increase the commercial viability of the garment. Whatever may be

reason, the Todas themselves don't ever speak of blue but insist that red & black are the colours best representing their identity & the power & significance of the Poothukuly.

Attempts were made to introduce weaving in the Nilgiris so that the Todas could produce their own fabric for their shawls but the effort failed & tradition prevailed. Till today, fabric is brought up from the plains of Tamil Nadu & Karnataka.

In earlier, Pukhoor [embroidery] was done with a wooden Needle & Kaag [thread] but today, a metal needle has replaced the wooden one. However the working method of embroidery that Toda women employ remains the same. No embroidery frame is put to use but instead they use their fingers to stretch the fabric that they are embroidering. By doing this they are able to clearly see, count & pick up threads. This ensures that the finished work leaves the fabric smooth & even with no puckering upsetting the flow of the lines & patterns. It is said that the stitch that is used here is 'counted thread-work'. This means that threads of the fabric are counted whilst stitching, as the needle follows a pattern, drawing through & along the fabric away from the embroiderer's body. At each turn little tufts of thread are left protruding body. This technique ensures that each pattern created has a rich texture.



WOMEN EMBROIDERING TODA SHAWLS

Because the Toda's traditional way of life is so closely interwoven with the natural environment, motifs & patterns are inspired by nature. Interestingly, there is a name for each motif. The mountains of the Nilgiris have inspired the twedhr, the squirrel has lent its strips to the peshk, the butterfly has given the kopan its chequered pattern held in the shape of a diamond, a beehive has inspired the Kwudrkor, yellow marsh flowers have given form to modhiry... the list is endless.

As much as the Poothukuly is the Toda's visible link with the natural world he or she inhabits and a symbol of identity & community spirit, the process of its creation has its own special importance. Being an activity solely undertaken by women, it is the hub of their social, community & cultural interaction, sharing & bonding. When household commitments have been met, women in each mund or settlement get together and sit out in a common area, embroidered shawls. During this crucial time, not only are craft skills & experience shared but community & family issues are discussed & often resolved.

Interestingly, although it may appear to the outsider that in Toda Society, it is the men who are in charge, in fact, it is actually the women who are the backbone of the community. They preserve traditional practices, ensure cultural continuity & most important of all, they are the embodiments of the female force that rules the universe of the Toda. This is why their sharing & bonding is of such vital importance. And the making of the Poothukuly becomes the catalyst for this to happen.



But times are rapidly changing. As Toda grasslands steadily vanish due to social forestry programmes & organized cash crop plantations, their vast herds of buffaloes diminish, shrinking their possibilities of earning a proper livelihood from milk & dairy produce. As such they are being forced to turn to various means of sustenance. Some have taken to vegetable farming whereas others are trying their hand at employment in local factories. Their seniority in the traditional hierarchy of the region prevents them from doing jobs that involve manual labour or any activity that presents them as being inferior to the other inhabitants. What further compounds the challenge is that Todas don't generally leave the Nilgiris for any sort of employment in other parts of the country because the Blue Mountains are their living universe.

This situation has gradually prodded Todas to turn to the Poothukuly & its embroidery tradition for support. What was once a craft activity confined solely to the community is now becoming a potential income generating activity. And so an aesthetic tradition continues & Toda women have gone beyond merely producing the Poothukuly. With the steady increase of market needs, they have diversified into a number of other richly embroidered items. With the rapid evolution of Toda Embroidery & a growing refinement of its patterns & forms, aesthetic impact has increased & the design elements of this tradition have found a place in the visual idiom of contemporary taste.

As important as this, Toda design is uniquely traditional & contemporary. It is an excellent example of an aesthetic form of expression that has appeal that goes beyond individual culture, verging on the universal. Its geometric forms & dramatic flow & contrasts have echoes in design traditions of early cultures in other parts of the globe.

THE SACRED BLUE

Creation of the Toda Universe

In the beginning, there was only the sky & the earth, Haen, the first Toda flew across the open blue in search of an ideal place for The Land of Belonging. After centuries of traveling, he finally found himself hovering over the beautiful Blue Mountains of the Nilgiris. Circling the verdant region, he saw endless cool grasslands, fruit trees, flowering shrubs, streams, rivers, waterfalls, wild animals, birds, insects & all manner of living beings, except of course humans. It was then that he realized that in fact this was the Land of Toda belonging that had been created specially for the community & had been waiting through the centuries to be finally inhabited.

And so, Haen descended & stood with his feet firmly on the soil of the Nilgiris. When he did this, an amazing power coursed through him like a brilliant white light. When surge of energy subsided, he saw before him – his wife. Now the two of them created the first Todas on earth & they multiplied like the stars in the heavens – hundreds of them, thousands. When the land was sufficiently populated, he divided it into the land of the Living & the Land of the Dead [which he called Amunore]. Once this was done, Haen decided that his task in the world of the living was over & he retreated to Amunore, becoming the Lord of the Other World. He left the world of the living in the charge of his beloved daughter Porshaey. Porshaey was an enlightened young woman who was endowed with the power to create the religious, social, cultural & economic identity of the Todas. She divided her people into 15 clans & gave each a specific geographical location to settle & live in. Then she created a separate divine female force to be worshipped by each clan in their mund [or settlement], along with prayers & family, religious & social rites & customs, attire & eating habits. When this was done she chose a sacred space where she sat & prayed.



TODA CATHEDRAL & HOUSE

One day, after she had concluded her prayers, she drew a magic circle on the earth. The moment she did this, the earth opened up and she leaned in and began to draw out one sacred buffalo after another. The people were amazed and watched in awe as 15 animals emerged from the earth. The 16 to appear had deformed horns so they began laughing. The process of creation stopped. One sacred buffalo was assigned to each temple of the fifteen clans & the sixteenth animal did not have sacred powers but it gave birth to innumerable others who formed the vast herds of the Todas, supplying them milk – the very basis of their economy.

Porshaey marked out the sacred & ordinary migration routes for buffalo herding & ensured that the seasons provided the right support for special varieties of grass to grow that would provide feed stock for the animals.

Since she ruled the Land of the Living & had placed female sacred powers in each clan temple, the Toda woman became the embodiment of the community. This is why even till today Toda women do not worship at the temples. In fact they maintain a distance from the temple's precincts. The men are assigned the task of worship at the temple.

Muthanad Mund is the place where Haen first arrived on earth & created the first Todas. It is also the place where Porshaey created religions, social, community & economic customs. Located near Ooty, a popular hill resort, the Mund is tucked away among the woods. The sacred spot is marked by a Toda 'Cathedral'. Not far from this spot is a circle of stones in an open field which marks the place where Porshaey created buffalos.