

Toda embroidery gets GI tag

Shantha Thiagarajan | TNN

Toda embroidery, unique to the tribal community of the Nilgiris, has been awarded geographical indication (GI) status. The launch of the GI registry for toda embroidery was held at the HADP hall in Ooty on Thursday.

"When I visited Ooty in 2005, I was intrigued by the embroidery of the Todas," said Bangalore-based law student Zaheda, who instrumental in getting the tag. "In 2003, the GI act had been notified and it struck me that the distinctive craft of the Toda tribals should be protected from imitation. I initiated the move for a GI tag for it."

Zaheda approached the local agencies working with the toda community. She identified Keystone Foundation and Dr Tarun Chabra, who runs Toda Nalavazhvu Sangam in the Nilgiris. In 2008, Zaheda proceeded further as a legal consultant for the project. Later, the government agency Poimpuhar was included in the applicants' list. Though the process of applying for GI tag started in 2008, it took five years to get the registry.

Nilgiris collector Archana Patnaik said, "This is the first time a tribal craft in the Nilgiris has been awarded a GI tag."

GI is a sign used on goods that have a specific geographical origin and possess qualities, reputation or characteristics that can be attributed to that place of origin. India, as a member of the World Trade Organisation, enacted the Geographical Indications of Goods (Registration and

Protection) Act, 1999, which came into force in September 2003. "With GI registry and prompt marketing, the economic status of the toda community will improve," said Zaheda.

The todas, a pastoral tribe from the Nilgiris, have developed their own distinctive style of embroidery or 'pugur' which means flower. "Our women ancestors developed the embroidery tradition by using wild flowers as the base and the thin skin of wild plants as thread," said Vasamalli, a toda woman.

Later, the tribals tried the embroidery on cloth. The intricate embroidery is usually done in red and black on a white base, and the finished product has an embossed look. It was originally done on shawls known as 'poothukuli'. Now, table mats, bags, pillow covers and runners are produced.

"The hand woven white base cloth and the threads (black and red) were supplied by chetties (merchant community) who brought the materials from the plains," said Vasamalli. The white base material used to be hand woven. Today, coarsely woven power loom material is used and two-ply woollen threads are used for embroidery.

"The base cloth, half-white indicates innocence, the red depicts adolescent and the black maturity," said Vasamalli. The motifs are inspired by nature and daily life. The main motif is the buffalo horn as the Todas worship buffaloes. Other designs include wild flowers, mountains and valleys.



WHEN A TRADITION MODERNISES: Nilgiris district collector, Archana Patnaik hands over the GI certificate to a toda woman



The design: Traditionally, embroidery was done using wild flowers as base and thin skin of a wild plant as thread. Later, it was tried on clothes and then the embroidery was done only on shawls, called 'Poothukuli.' The embroidery has red and

black bands that end at intervals thereby giving an embossed look

A Traditional WEAVE



The trade: The hand woven half-white base cloth and the black and red threads were supplied by 'chetties' (merchant community) who brought the material from the plains

The change: Earlier, the base material was always hand woven. However, now coarsely woven powerloom material is used as base while two-ply woollen threads are used for the embroidery

Motifs used: Buffalo horn, wild flowers, mountains and valley

Items made: Table mats, bags, pillow covers and runners