



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Toda traditional embroidery: design alteration & transformation

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Abstract

India is famous for its rich heritage, traditional textiles and brilliant workmanship. The growing concern in traditional Indian embroideries is time consuming technique, out dated look and less variety in products. To bring the traditional craft to its utmost extent of excellence, traditional Indian embroideries demands design modification, transformation and varied application. Toda tribes are found only in the Nilgiri district of Tamil Nadu state. Toda embroidery, an intricate form of embroidery worked by Toda women holds a ethnic distinctiveness for the Toda group of people. The present study focused to study the traditional Toda embroidery and to develop a new range of products through design modification and transformation. Totally, eight products were developed, three with toda embroidery, one in transforming toda embroidery as painting and three products through design modification. Consumer acceptability towards the developed toda products on various parameters was also studied. Fabric painting with toda design was most preferred by the consumers with respect to overall appearance. The study centered on giving a contemporary look to the products and developing it through faster technique. The study will help the toda women and NGO's to diversify the range of toda embroidered products and to develop articles of the similar appearance as like toda embroidery with less time consuming technique.

Key words: Design modification, Toda culture, Toda embroidery, Transformation

1. Introduction

India has a rich heritage of traditional embroidery designs. Tribal embroidery of India is very ethnic and articulate more about the country's rich tradition. Each tribe of India has its own typical style of embroidery, which integrates their culture, history and tradition. The Nilgiris District is within the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Nilgiri is the name given to a variety of mountains spread across the borders among the states of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Kerala. The Nilgiri Hills are a part of a bigger range referred to as the Western Ghats. The hills of Nilgris are the home to a number of inimitable tribal groups like Todas, Kurumbas, Kotas, Irulas, Kattunayakan and Paniyas. The location of Nilgris in India is shown in Figure 1. These tribal groups have their own unique style of living and speak different languages. The main occupations of the tribes are embroidery, farming and pottery.

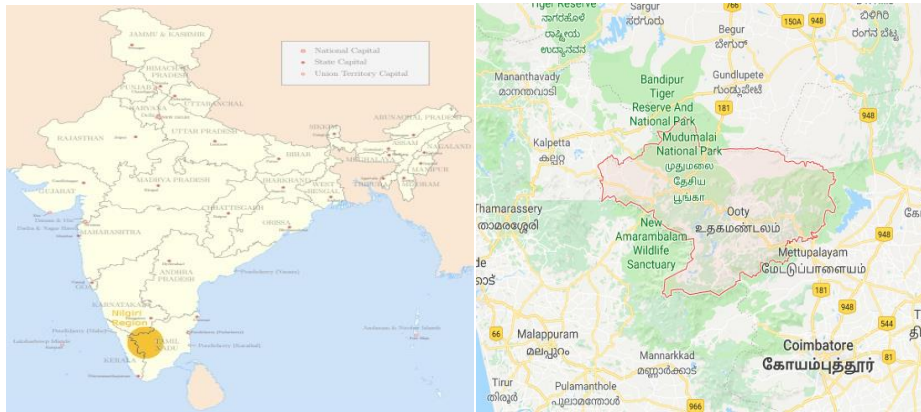


Figure 1: Location of Kotagiri

1.1 Culture and lifestyle of toda tribe

The Toda tribes have a unique and unusual lifestyle when compared to the other tribal groups. The Toda are tribal pastoral people who live in the Nilgiri Hills also called the Todava, Ton and Tutavar. They have received an excellent deal of attention over the years from anthropologists owing to their uncommon wedding customs and different cultural options. The tribes of Toda celebrate numerous festivals every year. The Toda most important festivals of the year, known as Modhweth, are celebrated at the Muthanadu mundh, near ThalaiKundah, in the Nilgiris¹. According to the local villagers, Toda men from 14 different clans living in different villages in the upper slopes of Nilgiris come to the Muthunadu mundh on January 1st to celebrate the festival. Buffaloes are the sacred animal of Todas. Both men and women pray for the wellbeing of their buffaloes, fast for the entire day and drink only milk mixed with jaggery and salt². The Toda temples are usually in the form of mundhs. The main temple is located in Muthanadu mundh which is considered to be the oldest and the only temple for the festival of Modhweth. Apart from this, each village consists of one temple and the women of the tribal community are not allowed to enter inside or even get closer to the temple. Each temple will have an allotted chief priest who will live a cleric life. The Toda temple is shown in Figure 2 and 3.



Figure 2. Toda temple.



Figure 3. Temple entrance.

Toda tribes are solitude in nature. The tribe unique embroidery is not well-known to much people. Regardless of wedding or funerals, the Toda embroidered shawls remain throughout all occasions. This makes the Toda embroidery a very big part

of their culture. Toda men and women wore the similar traditional costume. The costume consists of a very long piece of thick white cloth woven with red and black stripes with toda embroidery³. The traditional costume of Toda tribe is shown in Figure 4. The motifs used for embroidery are enthused by nature and daily life. The main motif is the buffalo horn and the other designs include wild flowers, mountains and valleys. The design appears as geometric forms at a glimpse and makes it very different from other embroideries⁴.



Figure 4. Traditional costume

Toda tribal embroidery is very distinctive and it should be preserved. Toda tribes are plummeting and this art of tribal embroidery is threatened and is in danger of becoming extinct. Revival of toda craft is significant to attain a strong growth in the market and to preserve the exquisite traditional embroidery⁵. The traditional fabric used for Toda embroidery is cotton cloth. As a part of revival, toda embroidery is worked on 100% linen and bamboo fabric using mock leno weave structure and garments were designed with toda embroidery for men, women and kids⁶. Design modification and transformation of Toda embroidery will help in revival of toda embroidery thereby giving a new look. It was imperative to diversify the Toda embroidery products and develop the products in low cost with faster technique to attract the tourist people. Keeping these facts in mind, a study was conducted with the following objectives:

1. To document the Toda embroidery craft of Toda tribe.
2. To develop distinctive Toda embroidery articles that has a contemporary look and available at an affordable cost.
3. To transform the Toda embroidery as fabric painting.
4. To develop Toda embroidery articles in combination with traditional embroidery to give a new look.
5. To find the acceptability of the developed range of Toda products.

2. Methodology

The study on Toda embroidery, design modification and transformation was carried out in two stage. The first stage of the study was an investigative field study to attain a complete insight about traditional Toda embroidery and present-day state of the artisans. This study intended to recognize the unique features of Toda craft and the transformation that had taken place to revive the craft. The study reviewed the status and welfare of the artisans, NGO's, raw material required, technique, colours and designs used for Toda embroidery. The second part of the study focused on developing products using Toda embroidery, transformation of Toda as fabric painting and developing products through design modification.

2.1 Cluster visit and selection of subjects

The first hand information about the craft was collected from the clusters of Nilgiris. The study was conducted in Muthunadu mundh, Taranad mundh, Kandhal mundh and Milkind mundh were the craft of Toda originated. Fifteen Toda artisans from Muthunadu mundh and Taranad mundh were interviewed. A visit was undertaken to NAWA (Nilgiris Adivasi Welfare Association) which is a famous welfare association located in the town of Kotagiri. They offer help to the tribes of Toda that benefits them financially and medically. NAWA also gives students from around the world, an opportunity to witness the day to day lives of the Tribes and document them. Nilgiris Adivasi Welfare Association mission is to help people to gain direct control over their own situations by helping women, to improve their lives, primarily through increasing their income earning ability and to empower them. NAWA organization works entirely for Toda tribes and on toda craft and its revival. As the literacy level of toda women were low, open ended questions were asked to know the craft, motifs, colours, background of artisans and technique of embroidery. Data regarding the origin of embroidery was collected through the books, journals and web sources. Women, who were actively working the Toda embroidery on fabrics from past ten years, were interviewed. The Toda women artisans were in the age group of 25-65 years. The artisans helped in providing information about the craft and the technique of embroidery.

2.2 Development of toda embroidered products

In the second part of the study, the traditional motifs of Toda embroidery were selected. The traditional toda motifs and colours were used to develop embroidery samples and products. The toda worked products were developed with the following specifications:

1. Toda embroidery as applique on Khadi fabric. (Product 1)
2. Toda embroidery on matt weave fabric. (Product 2)
3. Toda embroidery in the contemporary form. (Product 3)
4. Combination of Toda embroidery with Kasuti embroidery. (Product 4)
5. Toda embroidery as fabric painting.(Product 5)
6. Toda embroidery using Surface embellishment. (Product 6)
7. Combination of Toda embroidery with Kutch embroidery. (Product 7)
8. Toda embroidery as Identity tag (Product 8)

The developed products were contemporary and different from the usual range of existing toda embroidery products. Consumer preferences and acceptability of developed toda products were studied. The developed products were assessed using rating scale. A five point rating scale was used to assess the consumer preferences and acceptability of the toda products (Excellent-5; very good-4; good-3; fair -2; average-1). The attributes on which the evaluation of Toda embroidery products was done were based on design, neatness, colour combinations, aesthetic appearance and cost of the product.

3. Results and discussion

3.1 Findings of stage I study

3.1.1 Historical information about the toda craft

The tribes of Toda are well known with their renowned Toda embroidered shawls during all walks of their lives. The tribes consider it as a part of their tradition, culture, ritual and even everyday life. Toda women do an aesthetically great and complex sort of embroidery, and it holds a cultural uniqueness for the Toda community. This distinct variety of embroidery is domestically referred to as “Pugur” or “Pukhoor”.

The embroidery is based on counting. The embroidery involves hours of time and energy in order to achieve an alluring piece of work. Toda embroidery is a hereditary craft which is marked by its geometric motifs and beautiful finish, making it appear like a woven cloth. Primarily the embroidery was practiced by the women of the tribal community to pass their time together with the women from the other mundhs. The women meet the other women in a common area, talk and embroider their shawls for their own use. The embroidery is done on to produce a rich, embossed effect on the surface. The women are skilled and work the embroidery without tracing the pattern or referring to a book. Toda embroidery is traditionally worked on thick matty cloth of white or cream in colour. The embroidery is performed on off-white cotton cloth with red and black woolen threads. The stitches are worked in lengthwise direction giving a geometric effect on the fabric using woolen threads. Embroidery too is done on the reverse and without the use of any drawn or traced patterns like the other embroideries.

The ‘poothukuli’ plays an important role for all the occasions, like it is used in the weddings as well as for funeral. A newly embroidered shawl is favored for the wedding, and the designs and motifs on these are all related to prosperity, fertility, and security. The new embroidered shawl is used as a shroud on funerals known as “Pekhadaar Poothkuli.” The guests too adorn ‘poothukuli’ embroidered fabric during the wedding occasions. Toda tribal women have been known for their expertise in embroidery and this art is passed down from mother to daughter. The embroidery tradition has lived through a century of its documented history that we can witness in drapes, duppata, pillow cases, bags, purses kurthis and jackets.

3.1.2 The fabric and colours

Coarse bleached half white cotton cloth is used for Toda embroidery. The base cloth includes a balanced weave structure that permits the women to count and embroider the pattern. The Toda fabric used for Toda embroidery is shown in Figure 5. Colour of the ground fabric is off- white. Woollen threads are used for embroidery and the traditional coloured threads are red and black.



Figure 5. Fabric used for Toda embroidery.

3.1.3 Motifs

Motifs are inspired from local surrounding. Buffalo horn is that the most significant motif as a result of the tribal worships buffalo. Other motifs include floral, celestial bodies (like Sun and Moon), reptiles, animals, geometric motifs as shown in Figure 6. The common designs seen on the embroidered cloth are the rabbit ears and geometric triangles. The rabbit ears are seen worked on the borders of the cloth and triangle motifs in a box design is worked in honour of their first priest.



Figure 6. Motifs used for Toda embroidery

3.1.4 Domestic and export scenario of the craft

Toda embroidery is traditionally embroidered only by the tribal women as this is the only source of income for them. There are not many people who can practice the art form as the tribes are very strict in not allowing anyone else to practice the art. The domestic market share and the sale of the Toda embroidery are considerably low due to lack of education and unplanned marketing techniques. To increase their income, women started to develop products from shawls to bags, pillow cases, bags, jewellery to overcoats. The main attraction to their products is foreigners as they find different embroideries only in India and they would consider it as a remembrance of their trip. Toda embroidered products are very expensive. The high pricing of the products is due to the hours of labour. The Toda tribes sell the products in small stalls in different places where people are attracted in popular tourist areas around Ooty. Apart from this, there are many online websites that sell Toda embroidered products like shoes and jewellery. Toda products are not exported due to its lack of popularity and need for promotion worldwide.

3.1.5 Length of involvement with the craft

Every Toda women practice the embroidery almost every single day. The embroidery being the only source of income for the women, it is a must for them to do it even though many women practice it due to a lot of free time. Women work the toda embroidery for 4-5 hrs a day depending upon motifs. For bigger intricate designs, it will take days or weeks.

3.1.6 Raw materials and tools used

The main raw material used were hand woven unbleached cotton fabric, needle and two ply woollen embroidery thread. The fabrics were purchased from Karur, Tamil Nadu. Fabric was provided by NAWA organization and was purchased in meters. The fabric is also available as small quantities from the Ooty local market. The traditional 'puthkuli' shawls with red and black border were also purchased from Karur and Ooty local market. The thread and needles were purchased from local markets. The main colours of embroidery thread used were red and black. Apart from red and black colours, blue colour was used to make the shawl look different from the usual colour palette. The raw materials used for Toda embroidery is shown in Figure 7.

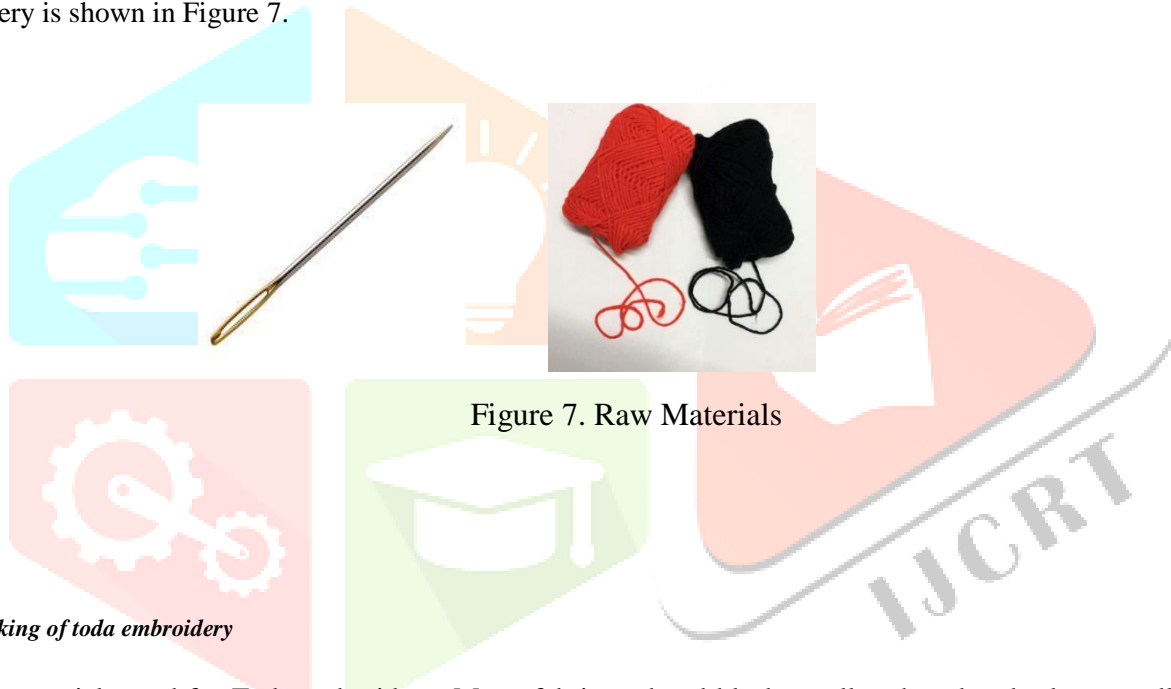


Figure 7. Raw Materials

3.1.6 Working of toda embroidery

The raw materials used for Toda embroidery: Matty fabric, red and black woollen thread and a long needle are shown in figure 8a. Insert the thread through the needle hole and secure the end with a knot. Plan the motif and insert the needle into the fabric in the order of 3 down-2 up-2down-2-up-2 down-2 up- 2 down-2 up-3 down. This step is shown in Figure 8b. Pull the thread out and repeat the pattern in the opposite direction leaving a small visible loop on the top as shown in Figure 8c. For the next step, the order will be 3 down- 4 up- 2 downs- 2 up- 2 down- 4 ups- 3 down. Pull the thread out leaving a small loop at the bottom. Repeat this pattern once again. This will make a repeat. Continue to obtain a border as shown in figure 8 d. Thus the first line of the motif is completed and the next line is started above the previous line to achieve the desired effect as shown in Figure 8 d.



Figure.8a



Figure.8 b



Figure.8 c



Figure.8 d



Figure 8a –8d: Step by Step Procedure of Toda Motif

3.1.7 Existing range of products produced

Currently different types of products are been produced which include shawls, draw string bags, pillow covers, necklace, shoulder bags etc. and are shown in Figure 9.



Figure 9. Toda products available in the market

3.1.8 Challenges faced by the toda tribe

The women of all ages suffer from eye irritation due to the intricacy and involvement of mind in the craft. The women produce their own end products of their choice and sell it through NAWA organization. The tribes are also often made to visit the market and sell their own products in order to gain exposure. The organization is working on introducing technological advances in brining the use of computer aided technology to create new designs.

3.1.9 Marketing of the products

Assistance from Government and Private Agencies brought Toda embroidery a GI (Geographical Identification) in September 2013 and was a great help for marketing the product. There are self-help groups helping them to sell products in a small retail outlet in the Botanical garden as shown in Figure 10. The Nilgiri Adivasi Welfare Association (NAWA) is implementing promotional activities to encourage Toda ladies for creating embroidered products. The self help group and NAWA has expertise in marketing, design development and handicraft exhibitions and other promotional activities in order to help the growth and preserving the art of Toda embroidery. The Kotagiri women's co-operative cottage industrial society Ltd. sells the various embroidered products.



Figure 10. Retail outlet in Botanical garden.

3.2 Toda embroidered products through design modification and transformation

3.2.1 Toda embroidery as applique on khadi fabric (product 1-garment)

A sleeveless style garment (ladies top) was designed with v-neck in front and back. Elastic is attached around the waistline to give good fit and gathered effect. The material used was khadi. The Toda embroidery was worked on Matty weave cloth. The embroidery was worked and cut into long strips. Zigzag stitches were given on the corner of the strip in order to secure the raw edges from fraying. The strip was then attached from top left shoulder diagonally reaching to the waist and ending at the hem. The hem is finished using rolled seam. The pattern, material, embroidery work and elastic used are shown in the Figure 11.



Figure.11 a

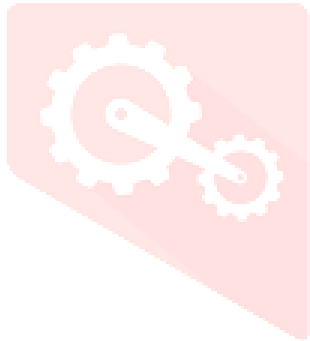


Figure 11. Materials used for constructing garment

Toda embroidery worked with red thread emphasis on the garment and makes the top look very attractive. The embroidered patch motifs are repeated in a rhythmic manner. The final appearance of the garment is shown in the Figure 12.



Figure 12. Final appearance of the garment

3.2.2 Toda embroidery on matt weave fabric (product 2- coaster)

A Matty cloth of 8''x 8'' square is cut with 1'' seam allowance. Toda embroidery is worked on the sides of the square fabric. The types of stitches used are running stitch, long and short stitches. The desired diamond effect is brought by counting the yarns and taking the stitches. To make the coaster, a plain woven fabric and a felt sheet are cut of the same size as the Matty cloth. The embroidered piece and the fabric is kept face to face and stitched leaving one side opened. The extra fabric in the corners is cut and the fabric is turned to the right side. The felt sheet is then inserted and the opening is then folded and stitched. The step by step procedure for making the coaster is shown in the Figure 13. The final appearance of the coaster is shown in the figure 14.



Figure 13. Sequence of constructing Coaster with Toda embroidery



Figure 14: Final Appearance of the Coaster

3.2.3 Toda embroidery in the contemporary form (product 3 – desktop accessory)

Light weight wood was used as stand. The stand was cut in the shape of a shoe pattern to give a contemporary look. The wooden stand was polished well. To cover the upper part of the wooden stand, Matty fabric is cut in the required shape and the Toda embroidery is worked on the fabric. The embroidered fabric piece is fixed on to the wooden part of the stand with adhesive. A small piece of leather is cut in the shape of the front part of the wooden base and stuck inside in order to protect any product being placed inside from scratches. The wood, material, embroidery work and the leather used are shown in the Figure 15.



Figure 15. Toda embroidery work as Footwear/Desktop accessory

The Toda worked embroidered material was attached to the front completely covering the front part of the stand. This will facilitate like a pocket for holding spectacles or cell phones. The desktop stand can also be used as a paper weight on the table. The final appearance of the finished product is shown in the Figure 16.



Figure 16. Toda work in Contemporary form

3.2.4 Combination of toda embroidery with kasuti embroidery (product 4- coaster)

A Matty fabric of 8"x9.5" was cut leaving 1" seam allowance on four sides. The embroidery is done in such a way that at every inch the colour of the anchor thread is changed. Two traditional embroideries were combined to produce the desired effect. The Toda embroidery is done on two sides of the Matty cloth and the Kasuti embroidery is worked in the centre. The fabric is then stitched to conceal raw edges. The step by step procedure and the final appearance of the product is shown in the Figure 17.

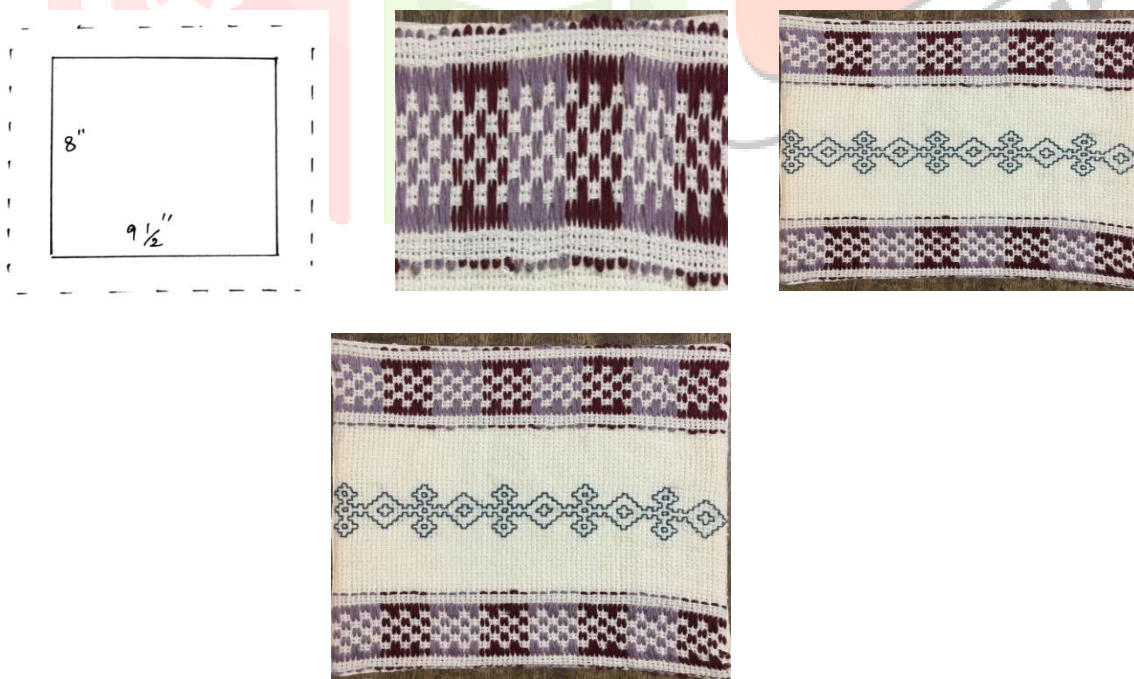


Figure 17. Coaster Worked with of Toda embroidery and Kasuti Embroidery

3.2.5 Toda embroidery as fabric painting.(Product 5-Coaster)

An attempt was made to transform the Toda embroidery as fabric painting. A swatch of khadi fabric of size 6”X6.5” was cut. Toda motif was drawn on the fabric. Using crimson red and black colour fevicryl fabric paint the Toda motifs were painted to achieve the desired effect. After drying for 48 hours the edges of the Toda painted swatch was finished. The Toda Painted coaster is shown in the Figure 18.

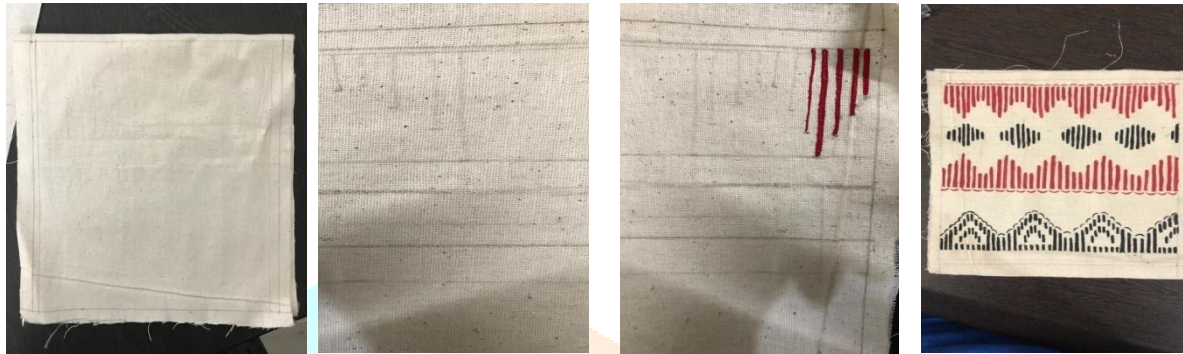


Figure 18. Toda Embroidery as fabric Painting

3.2.6 Toda embroidery using Surface embellishment. (Product 6- Footwear)

The sole of the footwear was sourced from a retail store. The sole was covered in leather and was cut in the shape of the sole with seam allowance. The covered sole was stuck to the lower heel part of the shoe. Another piece of the leather was cut according to the pattern with a soft denim lining and sewn on the top part of the footwear. This piece is stuck into the sole. On the other hand small leather patches in geometric shape are cut and the Toda motif is drawn onto it. Using tubular beads, the pattern of Toda was filled. After drying of the beads on the patches, the patches are stuck on the vamp of the shoe. The step by step procedure of making the footwear and the final appearance of the product is shown in the figure 19.



Figure 19. Toda embroidery using Surface embellishment on Footwear

3.2.7 *Toda embroidery with kutch embroidery. (product 7-coaster)*

A plain weave fabric of 8"x8" square fabric was cut leaving 1" seam allowance on four sides. Two traditional embroideries were combined to produce the desired effect. The Kutch embroidery was first traced on the fabric as a border and was embroidered to achieve the desired effect. The Toda embroidery motif was drawn in the centre of the fabric and it was embroidered. Grey colour anchor thread was used for the embroidery. The step by step procedure and the final appearance of the product is shown in the Figure 20.

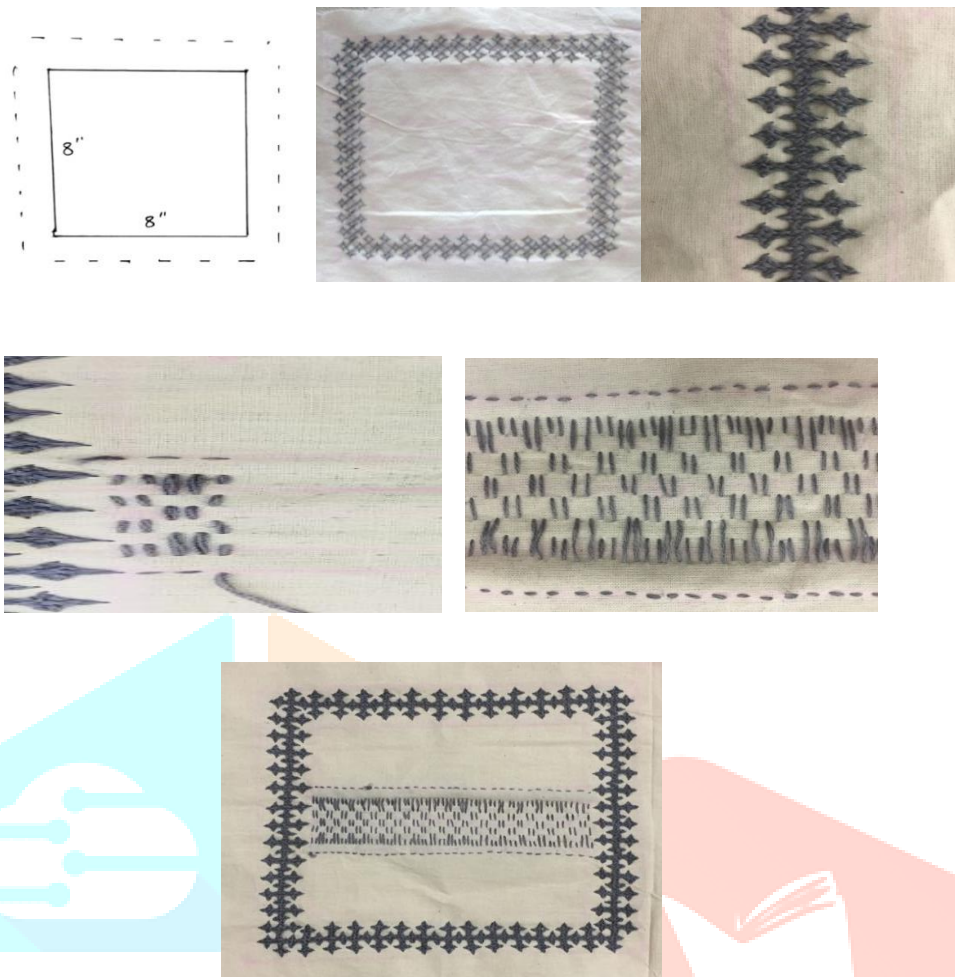


Figure 19. Combination of Kutch work with Toda embroidery

3.2.8 *Toda embroidery (Product 8- Identity Tag)*

A long strip of Matty fabric is cut and Toda embroidery is worked using red and black woolen thread and the colour thread is altered at the base on the pattern. The fabric is then folded and stuck with fabric glue to conceal the raw edges. A small loop is attached to the end of the fabric and is finished in between the two edges of the tag by hand stitching. The tag is then attached to the loop. The step by step procedure of working the embroidery and making the identity tag are shown in the Figure 20.



Figure 20. Identity Tag worked with Toda embroidery

4 Consumer Preferences Towards Toda Products

A survey was conducted for 50 judges consisting of families and friends of age group 15 – 50 to determine the consumer preference for the developed toda product. The survey consisted of subject's name and were asked to give their preferences towards the developed products using rating scale based on the attributes design, neatness, colour combinations, aesthetic appearance and cost of the product. Judges were asked to express their rating on a five point response scale from 1(very poor) to 5(excellent).The results of the consumer preferences towards embroidered products are shown in Table 2. The results show that the Toda painted Coaster secured the highest rank due to its design and cost efficient. Toda embroidery in surface embellishment, Footwear (P6) obtained lowest score towards consumer preference rating. This is due to considerably lower ratings received in all the attributes.

Table 1 Consumer preferences towards Toda Products

Sl.no	Product	Design	Neatness	Colour combinations	Aesthetic appearance	Cost	Total	Rank
1	P1	180	154	160	174	210	878	VI
2	P2	158	146	162	152	210	828	VII
3	P3	222	204	196	184	156	962	V
4	P4	230	234	215	210	235	1124	I
5	P5	212	204	218	204	230	1068	III
6	P6	120	126	134	134	120	634	VIII
7	P7	206	174	182	192	227	981	IV
8	P8	210	214	220	234	196	1074	II

5. Conclusion

Toda embroidery is the source of livelihood for Toda tribal people of Nilgiris. Toda women are skilled in working Toda embroidery. The Toda embroidered products need to be twinned with new ways and expression in order to reach to a large number of people who loved and value this traditional craft. Therefore, the study aims to learn the traditional Toda embroidery and develop toda embroidered articles as a need to expand the product range and to have a wider acceptance of the craft among the tourist people and worldwide. An attempt was made to design modification and transformation. Totally, eight products were developed, three with toda embroidery, two in transforming toda embroidery as painting and with embellishments; two products through combining toda embroidery with traditional embroideries. Consumer acceptability towards the developed toda products on various parameters was also studied. Among the developed products, the Toda painted coaster procured the highest rank due to its design and cost efficient. It is less time consuming technique. Fabric painting with toda design product was most preferred by the consumers with respect to overall appearance. The range of product developed using Toda embroidery was found to be of low cost and are reasonably priced and will be preferred by the tourist people. The study centered on giving a contemporary look to the products and developing it through faster technique.

The study on Toda craft and development of Toda embroidered products will help the designers and manufacturers as well as Toda tribal people and NAWA organisation to develop these products like identity tag, desktop stand, coaster, and garments with traditional Toda embroidery technique adopted with less time consumption and price.

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