

**The Preservation and Commercialization of Tribal Art and Handicrafts –
A Study on the NilgiriTodas and Kurumbas**

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Abstract

Indigenous to Tamil Nadu's Nilgiri Hills, the Todas and Kurumbas have a rich cultural legacy that is shown in their traditional handicrafts and artwork. The Kurumbas specialize in wood carvings and mural paintings that draw inspiration from tribal mythology and environment, while the Toda group is well known for their elaborate embroidery, which is distinguished by distinctive geometric patterns and colorful themes. Modernization, the loss of traditional knowledge, and the absence of sustainable commercialization pose problems for these creative forms despite their historical and cultural importance. This paper examines the measures implemented by the government, non-governmental organizations, and market-driven tactics to protect and develop these crafts. It looks at striking a balance between being

authentic and adjusting to the needs of modern consumers. The study also emphasizes how internet platforms and ethical trade help to ensure that these tribal artists are economically empowered while preserving their cultural identity. Through the examination of case studies and professional opinions, this research offers suggestions for the sustainable conservation and marketing of Toda and Kurumba handicrafts, guaranteeing that their heritage endures for upcoming generations.

Key Words:

Tribal Art, Toda Embroidery, Kurumba Handicrafts, Cultural Preservation, Commercialization, Indigenous Heritage, Ethical Trade, Sustainable Development, Nilgiri Tribes, Traditional Crafts

Introduction:

Numerous indigenous communities with distinctive cultural identities, customs, and creative expressions may be found throughout India. Through their traditional art and handicrafts, the Todas and Kurumbas of Tamil Nadu's Nilgiri Hills have managed to maintain their unique history. Often used to adorn shawls and clothing, the Toda tribe is especially renowned for its magnificent embroidery, which features elaborate geometric patterns sewn in red and black on a white backdrop (Basu 112). Inspired by nature, folklore, and spiritual beliefs, the Kurumbas are adept in carving wood and painting murals (Krishnan 78). These tribes have a great artistic heritage, but in the contemporary world, their crafts suffer many obstacles. Their practice and transmission have decreased as a result of globalization, shifting lifestyles, and dwindling traditional knowledge (Sharma 56). Furthermore, commercialization raises issues with authenticity, exploitation, and the loss of cultural importance even while it also presents economic opportunity. Through sustainable methods, market-driven efforts and governmental and non-governmental groups have worked to preserve and promote these indigenous art forms (Rao and Menon 34). The dual facets of Toda and Kurumba handicrafts' commercialization and preservation are examined in this study, along with their effects on these communities' economic empowerment and cultural heritage protection. This research attempts to offer insights into guaranteeing the continuation of these cultural traditions in a world that is rapidly modernizing by examining historical settings, contemporary issues, and prospective solutions.

These tribal art forms though of cultural and historical significance are increasingly under threat due to globalization, urbanization and changing socio-economic conditions. Younger generations move towards modern employment opportunities, so traditional artistic practices tend to decline (Sharma 56). Commercialization also brings opportunities and challenges. Tourism and digital marketplaces can be economically beneficial, but mass production and imitation threaten the authenticity of tribal crafts. In response, government agencies, NGOs and ethical trade organisations have introduced various initiatives to conserve and promote indigenous handicrafts (Rao and Menon 34). This study explores the preservation and commercialization of Toda and Kurumba handicrafts and assesses strategies for sustaining their cultural heritage alongside economic empowerment.

Literature Review

The influence of modernization on traditional communities has brought the preservation of indigenous arts and crafts to the forefront of study. "Every embroidery is not only a beautifying art but also a symbol of tribal identity and ritualistic importance," says Basu. Researchers have pointed out that the Geographical Indication (GI) status granted to Toda embroidery has helped maintain its authenticity and enhance its global recognition [1]. But scholars also note that the dwindling involvement of the younger generation poses a grave threat to the survival of this tradition.

The study of Kurumba handicrafts shows its artistic and ecological importance. "The wood carvings and murals of Kurumba depict tribal mythology and environmental awareness," says Krishnan [2]. Researchers argue that tourism and online platforms have facilitated commercialization, thereby improving economic prospects for artisans, but also potentially leading to cultural commodification and exploitation [3]. Authenticity must be balanced with the market demand for sustainable preservation. Recent literature indicates that ethical trade, digital marketing and collaborative initiatives between NGOs and government agencies can support indigenous crafts while protecting tribal identity.

Objectives of the Study

1. To study the cultural importance of Toda embroidery and Kurumba handicrafts.
2. To study the problems faced in preservation of indigenous tribal art forms.
3. To study the role of commercialization in economic empowerment of tribal artisans.

4. To assess the role of government agencies, NGOs and digital platforms in promoting tribal handicrafts.
5. To propose sustainable strategies for conservation and marketing of Toda and Kurumba crafts.

The present study is mainly concerned with the cultural significance of Kurumba handicrafts and Toda embroidery as important markers of indigenous identity and heritage in the Nilgiri hills of Tamil Nadu. The study describes the portrayal of customs, beliefs, rituals and artistic expressions of the Toda and Kurumba tribal communities through these traditional art forms. As per researchers like Basu, Krishnan [1][2], Toda embroidery and Kurumba handicrafts are closely linked with Tribal culture and are important expressions of indigenous knowledge and creativity. The research stresses the role of tribal handicrafts in preserving the identity of the community and the continuity of the culture by understanding their historical and cultural significance.

Another important objective of the study is to analyze the challenges faced in preserving these indigenous art forms in the modern era. Globalization, urbanization, migration, and declining interest among younger generations have contributed to the gradual loss of traditional craftsmanship and indigenous knowledge systems [3]. The study also seeks to examine the role of commercialization in the economic empowerment of tribal artisans while evaluating its impact on authenticity and cultural value. Furthermore, the research investigates the contribution of government agencies, NGOs, ethical trade organizations, tourism initiatives, and digital platforms in promoting tribal handicrafts and improving market accessibility [4]. Finally, the study aims to suggest sustainable strategies for preserving and marketing Toda and Kurumba crafts to ensure the protection of tribal heritage while supporting the socio-economic development of indigenous communities [5].

Methodology

The present study uses qualitative research to study the preservation and commercialization of Toda and Kurumba handicrafts. The data were collected from secondary sources like books, research journals, government reports, online archives and articles on tribal art and indigenous crafts. The socio-cultural and economic aspects of these tribal communities were studied through the study of scholarly studies regarding Toda embroidery, Kurumba wood carving, ethical trade, and cultural preservation [1][2].

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Besides analyzing literature, the research conducted a number of case studies associated with tribal craft communities, NGO projects, and government sponsored programs on development of handicrafts in the Nilgiri area. These case studies helped identify the actual strategies adopted for the conservation and promotion of Toda embroidery and Kurumba handicrafts. Efforts involving different methods like craft workshops, tribal exhibits, self-help groups, and handicraft fairs were studied in detail to understand the significance of institutional efforts in preserving indigenous skills and uplifting the socio-economic status of tribal craftsmen [3]. It was also important to examine the role played by NGOs in raising awareness about tribal culture and linking them to larger markets.

Additionally, the research adopted a comparative analysis approach in order to evaluate the implications of commercialization on authenticity, culture identity, and economic sustainability. This analysis explored the ways through which the development of tourism, market places, and internet have created more market avenues for Toda and Kurumba artisans through raising the level of awareness and creating more demand for their traditional craft items. However, the research sought to analyze issues related to imitation goods, commoditization of culture, and the gradual alteration of traditional designs to align with the contemporary tastes of consumers [4].

Preservation of Toda and Kurumba Handicrafts

The survival of tribal craft is very important for sustaining the culture and preserving the knowledge system of the indigenous population. Toda embroidery has been recognized by giving it Geographical Indication (GI) status, which prevents its replication. Training camps are organized by governmental institutions and NGOs that motivate young people to learn traditional embroidery skills. Artistic aspects of Toda embroidery are highlighted in cultural shows and handicraft fairs.

In the same way, Kurumba crafts are saved through programs run by welfare organizations for tribal people, and through community-based efforts involving culture. Artwork in the form of wood carvings and mural painting is exhibited in museums and cultural centers to ensure that its artistic tradition is preserved. The role played by non-governmental organizations that operate in the Nilgiri area involves helping artisans use green technology and promoting marketing of their products [3].

Commercialization and Economic Empowerment

The process of commercialization is extremely important in enhancing the economic situation of the tribal artisans. There has been an increase in tourism in the Nilgiri Hills, leading to greater demand for Toda shawls, embroidery items, and Kurumba handicrafts. E-commerce sites and social media have facilitated the artisans in connecting with consumers nationally and internationally. Fair trade organizations help in establishing fair prices for these products [4].

But commercialization is also accompanied by certain issues. Industrial production and the creation of imitation goods lessen the exclusivity of native handicrafts and, at times, involve exploitation of indigenous knowledge for business purposes. Certain craftsmen find themselves disadvantaged by their inability to reach wider markets owing to their lack of computer skills and insufficient funds. Thus, in order to make sustainable commercialization possible, it is essential to strike a balance between economic benefits and the protection of culture [2][5].

Findings

This research proves that the crafts of Toda and Kurumba tribes are precious cultural resources that help in the representation of tribal identity and native knowledge. The efforts made toward the preservation of these arts include their inclusion in the GI system, support by NGOs and governmental programs. Tourism and modern technologies have helped to commercialize these crafts.

However, issues like modernization, loss of traditional wisdom, imitation products, and cultural commoditization keep posing threats to their authenticity. Ethical trade, cultural education, and digital marketing should be combined to promote sustainable development that preserves the culture of tribes while boosting economic growth.

Conclusion

The art and crafts of the Todas and Kurumbas are indicative of the cultural wealth of the Nilgiris region of Tamil Nadu. Although these artistic traditions have had to contend with pressures from modernization and globalization, they have been able to sustain themselves through art and crafts practiced by the Toda and Kurumba tribes are part of their cultural

legacy and indigenous knowledge passed down through generations from the Nilgiris region of Tamil Nadu. The embroidery practice of the Toda tribe is characterized by complex geometrical designs with symbols of their cultural traditions, ritual practices, and identity. Likewise, the wooden carvings and murals by the Kurumba tribe are linked to their tribal mythology and spirituality in association with nature. The indigenous art forms not only depict the beauty of their crafts but are also important representations of cultural heritage and traditions [1][2].

Despite their cultural significance, these artistic traditions have faced increasing challenges due to modernization, globalization, migration, and changing lifestyles. Younger generations often shift toward modern occupations, leading to a decline in traditional craftsmanship and the transmission of indigenous knowledge. However, preservation initiatives undertaken by government agencies, NGOs, ethical trade organizations, and digital platforms have contributed to sustaining these tribal art forms. Commercialization through tourism, exhibitions, and online marketplaces has created economic opportunities for artisans while increasing public awareness about tribal culture. Nevertheless, balancing market demands with cultural authenticity remains essential to ensure that these traditional crafts continue to survive without losing their original identity and heritage [3][4].

Efforts made by government organizations, non-governmental organizations, ethical trading bodies, and internet-based initiatives can help promote and preserve these tribal crafts through sustainable means. Getting the youth of these tribes involved in their traditional arts, increasing their accessibility to markets, and safeguarding their intellectual and cultural property rights are some of the measures that can help ensure the perpetuation of their culture into the future.

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