

Tribal Handicrafts of 'The Nilgiris'

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S.Balakrishnan* The name 'Nilgiris' or 'The Blue Mountains' is as poetic as the place itself. The Nilgiris district in Tamil Nadu is home for the Toda, Kota, Kurumba, Irula, Paniyan and Kattunaicken tribes. The Government of India has identified all these six tribes as Primitive Tribal Groups (PTGs). The verdant forest of the blue mountains has been their home for ages. Living amid the beautiful surroundings has probably made them artisans of equally beautiful handicrafts. Well known among these six groups are the Toda people and their embroidery work. The Toda women are deft in embroidery work. Their traditional garment is of thick white cotton cloth with red, black or blue stripes, which is further embellished with hand embroidery. Woollen or cotton thread is used for this embroidery work. To suit modern taste and needs, a variety of items like cell phone pouch, table cloth, scarf & shawl, skirts & tops, drawstring purse & bag, coasters, frocks, bags, waist coat, etc are also made. This has been made possible under the 'Ambedkar Hastshilp Vikas Yojana' (Ambedkar handicraft development scheme). Many women Self-Help Groups have been formed which, in turn, have been amalgamated into a federation. Though the pastoral Todas herded buffaloes and dealt in dairy produce, change in land use has deprived them of pasture lands. However, their unique craft has survived and stood the test of time. The Kotas live in seven settlements, generally known as Kotagiri or Kokkal. They are village artisans who are good in carpentry, black smithy and pottery. As time changed, only a few families are engaged in these skills as a means of living. They eke out a living by cultivating small plots of patta land. The Kurumba people are experts in basketry and other related bamboo works. The traditional occupation of the Kurumbas is gathering food, collection of honey and forest produce. They are good at herbal medicine and traditional healing. Now, they are mainly engaged in agriculture and those who do not own lands work as casual agricultural laborers.

The other three groups - Irulas, Paniyans and Kattunaicken are not known for traditional handicrafts. They are generally food/forest produce gatherers, now working as casual agricultural/estate labourers. Tamil Nadu has a total of about 6,51,321 tribal population as per 2001 census which constitutes 1.02% of the total population. There are 36 tribes and sub tribes in Tamil Nadu. They are distributed in almost all the districts and they have contributed significantly in the management of the forests. Literacy rate of the population is 27.9%. Most of the tribes in the State are cultivators, agriculture labourers or dependent on forests for their livelihood. But only these six groups are classified as primitive tribes. ** **Officer, Press Information Bureau, Chennai** ✖

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