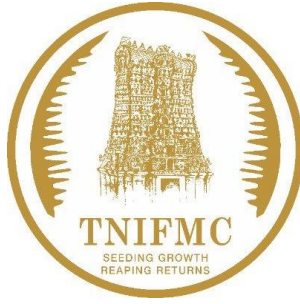




Tamil Nadu Infrastructure Fund Management Corporation Ltd

CASE STUDY

nilam

From Skill to *Sustainable Livelihoods*

Empowering Rural Women.
Crafting Change.

A social enterprise creating
handmade dolls that empower
women with skills, income
and independence.



Empowering
Rural Women



Creating Dignified
Livelihoods



Building Strong
Communities



Sustainable
Social Impact

Prepared by:



**Tamil Nadu
Emerging
Sector
Seed Fund**

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1. Executive Summary: An Untapped Workforce



The Nilgiris is home to a large population of rural and tribal women whose primary livelihood has historically come from agriculture and plantation labour – physically demanding, **seasonal work with low, irregular pay and no path to advancement**. Alongside this, many of these women also carry decades of secondary hands-on skill in stitching, tailoring, and craft-based work, passed down within families across generations. Yet this skill has stayed almost entirely informal: practiced within the household or through casual exchange with neighbours, **never linked to an organised market that could reward consistently**.



RISING WORKFORCE PARTICIPATION (47.6%) AMONG RURAL AND TRIBAL WOMEN HAS NOT TRANSLATED INTO ECONOMIC SECURITY.

The Good Doll, together with the Indian Yards Foundation (IYF), built that bridge. Women from rural and tribal communities across the Nilgiris are identified, trained to commercial production standards, and organised into producer groups – moving from informal skill-holders to market-ready manufacturers. What they now produce is **Nilah: a home grown, fabric-quality doll** designed to reflect Indian childhood, filling a market long dominated by imported, plastic-based characters that Indian children could never fully see themselves in.

The outcome is a livelihood model where every doll sold directly creates income for the woman who made it. Women who once worked in agriculture roles, now work in structured production roles from within their own villages, without having to migrate away from their families or communities. As The Good Doll grows – across retail, D2C, and B2B channels – that **growth creates direct demand for more skilled producers**, turning commercial success and women's economic independence into two outcomes of the same model.

2. The Challenge:

a) Untapped Economic Potential of Rural & Tribal Women:

The Nilgiris is home to several indigenous and tribal communities where women have traditionally contributed significantly to household livelihoods through agriculture, forest-based activities, tailoring and craft-related work. However, despite possessing skills and experience, participation in formal and market-linked economic activities has historically remained limited.

46%

of rural working women do not have access to regular income-generating opportunities.

Tribal communities in the Nilgiris highlights that women often rely on agriculture, forest produce collection and wage labour as primary sources of income. **Limited access to education, financial resources, organised markets** and livelihood opportunities has historically restricted their economic advancement.

Even when women possess stitching, tailoring or craft skills, they frequently lack:



Access to organised buyers.



Consistent order volumes.



Production infrastructure.



Quality control systems.



Direct market connections.



Skills alone are not enough. Without the right ecosystem support, their potential cannot translate into sustainable livelihoods.



Tribal women face barriers in converting skills into sustainable income-generating activities due to the **absence of strong market linkages** and structured value chains.

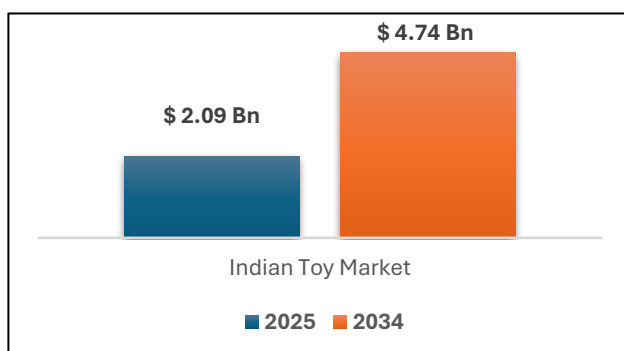
Most women remained engaged in informal or low-paying activities, often earning **irregular incomes** and having limited opportunities for economic advancement.

As a result, a significant pool of capable women remains underutilised. The challenge is therefore not only unemployment but also **economic exclusion**, where existing skills and productive capacity fail to translate into meaningful and stable income generation.

b) Plastic-Dominated Toy Market:

India's toy market is estimated at nearly **\$2.09Bn in 2025** and is expected to reach **\$4.74Bn by 2034** by making it one of the fastest-growing consumer segments in the country.

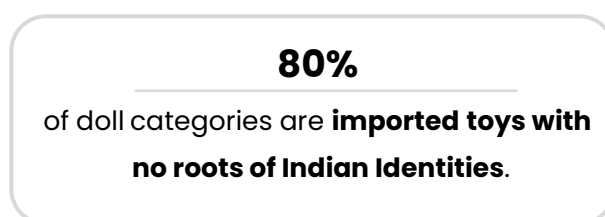
Source – [PIB](#), [Research and Markets](#)



Despite this growth, approximately **90% of the toy category is controlled by plastic-based products**. The dominance of plastic-based toys has also contributed to a category where products are often designed for mass consumption rather than emotional connection and long-term engagement.

As consumer awareness around sustainability continues to grow, the industry faces increasing pressure to explore alternatives to conventional plastic-intensive manufacturing. However, scalable examples of products incorporating recycled materials into mainstream toy production remain limited, leaving a significant gap in the market for more resource-efficient manufacturing approaches.

c) Absence of Culturally Relevant Toys in Indian Childhood:



For decades, Indian children have grown up playing with dolls and characters that often look different from them, live in unfamiliar environments and represent cultures far removed from their own realities.

Despite its rich cultural heritage, regional stories and local role models, there are relatively few toy brands that intentionally celebrate Indian childhood.

The challenge was therefore not the absence of toys, but the absence of relatable characters and narratives that reflect the diversity, values and realities of Indian childhood.

3. Addressing the Challenges:

a) Empowering Tribal Women Through Structured Upskilling:



Indian Yards Foundation (IYF), established by the promoters to build the capabilities of women from tribal and rural communities in the Nilgiris. IYF serves as the foundation's skilling and capacity-building arm, creating pathways for women to develop both technical and professional competencies.

Source - [Unicef](#), [Doms](#)

The Capacity-Building Model: A shift from irregular to stable income:

IY developed a structured capacity-building model designed to move women from informal skill holders to market-ready producers. Unlike conventional livelihood interventions that focus only on vocational training, the model combines **technical upskilling, production readiness, quality management and leadership development**.

Identification → Upskilling → Capacity Building → Community Clusters → Commercial Production

1. Identification:

The journey begins in the villages themselves — identifying and mobilising **women from remote and tribal communities across the Nilgiris**, many of whom have never had access to formal, market-linked work before.

2. Upskilling:

Once enrolled, women undergo **structured technical training** built around commercial production standards — covering stitching, doll-making, finishing, quality control, and packaging. The emphasis goes beyond teaching a craft: it builds the precision, consistency, and quality-consciousness needed to create products that meet real retail and customer expectations, not just household-level output.

3. Capacity Building:

Through **continuous mentoring and hands-on learning**, women develop problem-solving ability, workplace discipline, teamwork, and confidence in their own capabilities. This stage reshapes participants from learners into skilled producers who can contribute meaningfully across every stage of the value chain — technical skill matures into practical, on-the-job capability.

4. Community Clusters:

IYF organises women into **community-based production clusters**, enabling them to work collaboratively, take ownership of production activities, and build pathways toward village-level entrepreneurship.

5. Commercial Production:

Combining technical training, capacity building, and collective organisation, this final stage brings together a workforce of skilled rural women producing at commercial scale — **earning sustainable, recurring incomes** while emerging as confident contributors to their families, communities, and local economies.

The flow chart below illustrates how The Good Doll moves from market research and product design to producing each Nilah doll:



b) Building Home Grown Toy Brand – “Nilah”:

1) Birth of “Nilah”

Inspired by the landscapes, communities and spirit of the Nilgiris, Nilah was imagined as a 10 year old mountain girl who embodied curiosity, confidence and imagination. Unlike many dolls available in the market, Nilah was not designed to represent an unattainable ideal. Instead, she was intended to reflect the everyday experiences of Indian children and provide them with a character they could identify with.

She became the medium through which children could engage with stories, emotions and experiences rooted in Indian contexts. This was an important strategic decision because it shifted The Good Doll from being a manufacturing enterprise to becoming a character-led consumer brand.



2) Building the World Around “Nilah”:



What initially started as a single doll gradually evolved into a broader platform built around representation and storytelling. The focus shifted from selling dolls to building a world around Nilah to develop a complete ecosystem where every product deepened a child's relationship with the character.

The objective was to transform Nilah from a product into a character that children could grow with and engage with across multiple touchpoints.

3) Evolution from a Product to a Brand:

Nilah's universe was gradually expanded to include accessories and a deeper narrative world. Her character was further developed through the *Raising Nilah* series on Instagram, which brought her story and personality to life. A dedicated Nilah storybook is currently under development, reflecting the brand's evolution from a product into a comprehensive character-driven brand.

Product Categories:

- Individual fabric dolls
- Accessories kit
- Books, Comics and Story cards
- Festive Editions
- DIY craft kits
- Small Fabric dolls – Kutty Nilah
- Bed & Couch sets



What started as a niche offering evolved into a multi-channel business. Today, the company operates through a mix of 40% - Direct-to-Consumer (D2C), 40% - Retail and 20% - B2B channels. The brand has established relationships with over **80 retail partners and has expanded its presence into travel retail through 6 airports.**

c) Turning Waste to Worth: A Sustainable Alternative to Plastic:

Unlike conventional dolls that rely on virgin polyester filling and newly manufactured fabrics, The Good Doll integrates two waste streams into its production process:

- Textile waste
- Recycled PET plastic.

Textile waste that would otherwise be discarded is repurposed into fabric components and accessories, while recycled PET fibre derived from discarded plastic bottles is used as the stuffing material.



4. Tamil Nadu Emerging Sector Seed Fund role in Empowering Women:

Rather than viewing The Good Doll solely as a toy company, TNESSF recognized it as a market-led livelihood model where business growth directly translates into employment generation for women. Through strategic capital support, TNESSF enabled the company to strengthen production capacity, expand market access, invest in storytelling-led brand building and prepare for the next phase of growth.

What has changed after TNESSF Investment?

1) Rural & Tribal Women Empowerment:

- Over 400+ women have been upskilled till now and 40+ have been upskilled post investment. 105 rural and tribal women artisans engaged through a hybrid model of decentralised and centralised operations.
- Women who previously relied on agriculture, plantation work and informal employment opportunities now participate in a structured production ecosystem, earning recurring monthly incomes through skill-based work carried out within their own communities.

BEFORE UPSKILLING	POST UPSKILLING
Rs. 2,500 Per month (Agriculture and Plantation work/ Dependent on Family)	Rs.10,000–25,000 Per month (Structured production roles within community-based producer groups)



Beyond income, working locally in the Nilgiris allows women to remain embedded in their families and communities — avoiding migration, preserving caregiving roles, and maintaining social continuity.

The workplace became a site of identity, pride, peer support and not just employment

2) Manufacturing Capacity:

Investments in infrastructure and production equipment have significantly strengthened operational capabilities, with manufacturing capacity **increasing by nearly 2x** compared to pre-investment levels.

Particulars	Before Investment	After Investment
Dolls per month produced	3000	6000

3) Market Penetration:

a) Retail Stores:

The company expanded its retail footprint from **52 stores to 80 stores**, representing a **54% increase in physical distribution reach**. This expansion indicates growing market acceptance and stronger retailer confidence in the brand. A wider retail presence has improved product accessibility, enhanced brand visibility across geographies, and strengthened the company's ability to acquire new customers through offline channels.

Particulars	Before Investment	After Investment
No. of Stores – Retail	52	80

b) Focused D2C Market :

A strategic focus on D2C sales helped The Good Doll to accelerate the growth, resulting in a **7x increase in online sales** and improved digital channel effectiveness.



Added new marketplaces and quick commerce to D2C distribution:



4) Introduction of New product Categories:

The product ecosystem expanded to include :

- **Nilah's extended family of characters**, doll garment sets, miniature bed and couch sets, and a growing comic series — turning Nilah from a standalone product into a character children could live alongside, play with, and grow up with across multiple touchpoints.

- Launch of the **"Raising Nilah" series on Instagram**, giving the character a voice and personality beyond the physical doll and building an emotional connection with audiences online.
- A **storybook is now under development**, extending Nilah's world into narrative formats that will let children engage with her story in an entirely new way.



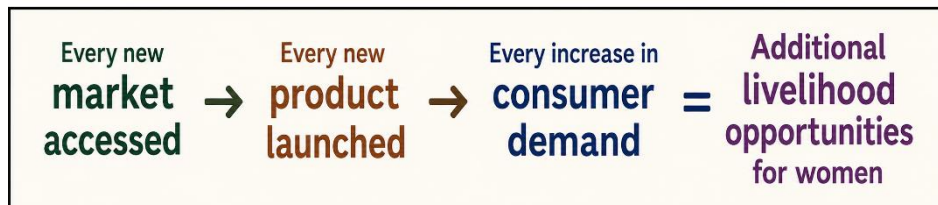
This expansion wasn't just about adding SKUs — it was about deepening the storytelling.

The Multiplier Effect:

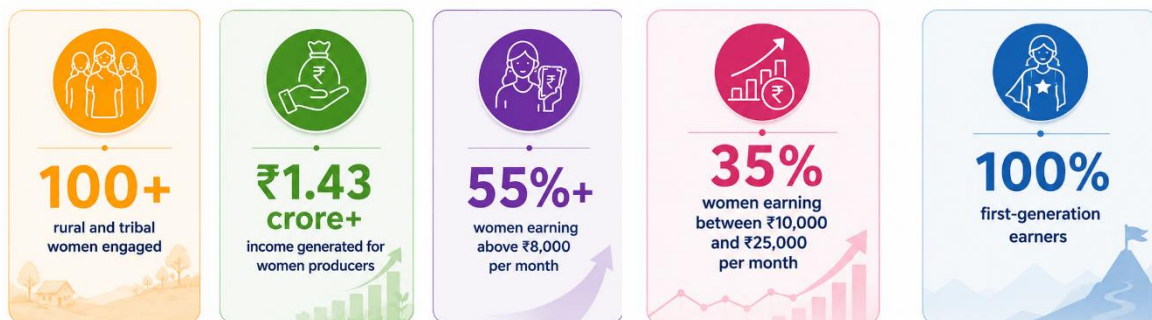
TNESSF recognised that every stage of the company's growth had a direct relationship with employment creation. Unlike conventional manufacturing models where growth is often driven by automation and centralisation, The Good Doll's production ecosystem depends on skilled women participating across stitching, assembly, finishing, quality control and supervisory functions.

By supporting the company's expansion, TNESSF enabled The Good Doll to create additional production capacity that could absorb more women into the value chain. As sales volumes increase through new channels, expanded retail presence and product diversification, the demand for skilled producers also increases.

This creates a powerful **multiplier effect**.



Impact created by TNESSF Investment:



From Producers to Community Leaders: *The Story of Reema:*



Reema lives in a small village called Hubbathalai in the Coonoor region. She **previously earned ~₹2,500 per month** by stitching simple garments for other women in her village on a manual domestic sewing machine.

Reema joined as a producer she advanced into a Production Coordinator role. *She now owns a fully automatic industrial sewing machine now earns more than ₹10,000 per month*, manages a team of around 20 women, supports a home loan and sends her child to a private school.

Parameter	Before	After
Salary	2,500 per month	10,000 – 25,000 per month
Role	Manual domestic stitching	Production Coordinator
Management	No team	Manages a team of 20
Life Upgrades	No financial freedom No decision making	Supports Home Loan Children studies in Private School

The Moment of Shift: *The story of Pradeepa:*

For years, Pradeepa contributed to the production of Nilah dolls behind the scenes. A turning point came when her husband spotted Nilah dolls displayed at a prominent hotel in Ooty and **proudly shared a photograph with her saying, "Look, this is your work."**

What was once unseen labour within four walls had become a product recognised and valued by customers. As The Good Doll's presence expands across retail and hospitality channels, women like Pradeepa are increasingly seeing their craftsmanship gain visibility, recognition and a sense of pride.



Parameter	Before	After
Visibility	No Public exposure	Crafts are displayed in prominent locations such as hotels and retail outlets
Recognition	Unacknowledged outside her home	Recognition from customers, retailers and her husband's appreciation validates her talent and effort
Identity	Primarily seen as a domestic worker	Skilled artisan whose creations are showcased and celebrated.

5. Contribution to Sustainable Development Goals (SDG):

SDG	Description	Impact
	No Poverty	Women from rural and indigenous communities develop earning potential which can lift them and their communities out of poverty.
	Quality Education	By building relevant vocational skills among women, the company ensures employment, decent jobs, entrepreneurship and lifelong learning opportunities for them.
	Gender Equality	The company ensures women artisans achieve self-independence by helping them instil an entrepreneurial mindset and contribute financially to their families. 70% of the women expressed increased participation in household decisions and 80% of them expressed financial freedom.
	Decent Work and Economic Growth	The company assures skilled and decent work by forming women-led producer groups and marketing their products. By diversifying the economy of Nilgiris, it helps ease the environmental strain caused by tourism. 400+ women have been upskilled and 55% of them earn more than INR 8,000 per month.
	Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	The in-house design team encourages innovation in product development. Through its operations, the company is enabling villages into craft clusters.
	Reduced Inequalities	The company helps reduce income inequalities and promotes equal opportunity, reducing inequalities of outcome and enhancing the social and economic inclusion of women.
	Responsible Consumption and Production	The company follows a zero-waste production process where leftover materials from larger products are upcycled into making smaller ones. To date, 5 Lakh+ plastic bottles have been repurposed through direct material use.
	Climate Action	The company contributes to a circular economy by consuming upcycled pre-consumer textile waste for making dolls. To date, approximately ~30,000 kgs of textile waste has been saved from going to landfills.

6. Conclusion:

TNESSF's Value Creation Framework:

The Challenge	The Shift in Approach	The Outcome
Limited livelihood opportunities for rural and tribal women	Market-linked employment through a consumer brand	Sustainable and recurring income opportunities. 55% <i>of the enabled women earn >8,000 per month.</i>
Access to organised markets was limited	Mix of a decentralized model with women producing from their respective houses and parts of the production being managed centrally in a controlled manufacturing unit	Women being first-generation earners , accessing predictable, skill-based work. 100+ <i>Rural & Tribal women engaged in production</i> 400+ <i>Women are upskilled</i>
Toy industry dominated by imported and plastic alternatives 90% of the toys in the market are made out of plastic	The company integrates ethical manufacturing , responsible material use	Dolls are filled using recycled PET poly fibre , repurposing the equivalent of ~5 plastic bottles per doll. 5Lakh+ <i>plastic bottles have been repurposed through direct material use</i>
Existing toy category does not reflect Indian Identities.	A Home grown, Fabric-quality toy brand designed specifically for Indian children.	Nilah represents Indian childhood and everyday life, challenging imported beauty and lifestyle norms. ~50,000+ <i>Dolls have been sold in FY26.</i>

The Good Doll's journey from a single character-led doll to a structured livelihood model is best captured in numbers.

Together, these numbers describe a single, self-reinforcing system: rising consumer demand for Nilah drives higher production volumes, which directly expands income opportunities for rural and tribal women - turning commercial growth and women's economic independence.



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