



PROSPECTS OF HANDLOOM INDUSTRY IN RURAL LIVELIHOOD: A STUDY OF KIKRUMA VILLAGE, NAGALAND

¹T Grace Puro and ²Mahmudul Hasan Laskar

¹MA Sociology
Dept. of Sociology,
University of Science and Technology Meghalaya

²Assistant Professor
Dept. of Sociology,
University of Science and Technology Meghalaya

Abstract: *The traditional practice of handloom is a part of the native people of Nagaland and particularly among the Naga women. In olden times, women were tutored to weave at an early age and as such, they were anticipated to weave for the entire family which is one of the most basic requirements of life. However, gradually over time, this traditional practice is losing significance. Today, only a sprinkle of women especially in the rural areas are in the field of practice but are faced with numerous problems. Due to the lack of skill development and encouragement among the youths, the handloom industry might slowly lose its importance and is also likely to disappear in the future generation. To examine the practice of handloom and to analyze the growth and prospects of the handloom sector in rural development, the present study will be carried out.*

Keyword: *Rural development, tribal, handloom, old practice*

INTRODUCTION

The practice of handloom is presumably one of the oldest traditional practices in India which are extensively honoured even today. It is deemed to be one of the largest economic activities after agriculture. Traditional handloom is an old practice of indigenous community with excellent craftsmanship, representing and conserving the vibrant cultures and has been used since time immemorial. This industry is largely decentralized, with a majority of its production taking place within the homes of the artisans and supports the livelihood of India's rural and semi-rural

population. These activities are spread across thousands of towns and villages and involve the transfer of skills from one generation to the next.

The history of handloom dates back to the Indus valley civilization where archaeological evidence shows the use of spindles and whorls for spinning cotton. The art of embroidery and dying was considered a highly advanced occupation back in the day. India's weaving style, procurement of raw materials; the fabrics produced and so on were mentioned in various ancient kinds of literature. The excellent craftsmanship of Indian weavers in textile production was immensely popular even outside the country and the demand for these handlooms grew in leaps and bounds.

According to the Reservation of Articles for Production Act, 1985, the term handloom is defined as "any loom other than power loom". The basic concept of this industry involves the process of operating the system by use of hand which is made out of a wooden structure called the loom. The industry is primarily household-based involving the efforts of the whole family unit for its production. As per the Third Handloom census conducted by the government of India, nearly 27.83 lakh households are employed in weaving and allied activities which is the second largest rural economic industry after agriculture. Currently, the country has an inventory of over 2.4 million looms and India constitutes 95% of the world's hand-woven fabric production. There are a total of 23.77 lakh looms in India, of which 87% are operated in rural areas.

The Northeastern states of India comprising Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim were homes to various ethnic groups, particularly also enjoy supremacy for their rich cultural heritage of artistic handloom products. Over the years, these states have been tremendously contributing economically through the production of handloom.

Three commonly used types of looms found in the country were Pit looms, Stand looms, and Frame looms. Besides, the early looms such as the back-strap handloom, are also still used in many undeveloped areas where electricity is not available. Raw materials like cotton, wool, silk and linen are popularly used for producing textile fabrics.

The handloom sector plays a significant role in employing vast segments of rural and semi-rural inhabitants and in preserving the cultural heritage of the region. It strengthens the self-sufficiency of the rural economy, thereby increasing the quality of life and the level of income among weavers. Since handloom is eco-friendly and requires minimal use of power the products can also be determined and transformed according to the customer's preferences.

OBJECTIVES

To examine issues and challenges in the handloom industry and to study the mechanism adopted by the handloom weavers in light of the sustainable livelihoods framework.

METHODOLOGY

The study will encompass both primary and secondary field surveys. Primary data will be collected by using simple random sampling. Secondary data will be collected from published literature such as books, journals, articles etc. The study will be descriptive as it will employ qualitative research. Tools for data collection will employ interview schedules and observations.

HANDLOOM INDUSTRY IN NAGALAND

Nagaland is a state located in the northeastern part of India. The state was inaugurated on 1st December in the year 1963. The state has 16 administrative districts with Kohima as its capital. It consists of 17 major tribes along with other sub-tribes. Linguistically, Nagaland has been dubbed the most diverse state in India. Nagaland has vibrant cultural diversity of costumes, dance and music, art and craft, folklore, festivals and so on. The most vibrant is the “Hornbill Festival” famously known as the “festival of festivals” which is celebrated annually (in the month of December) with pomp and gaiety, adorned with rich and colourful traditional attires to showcase the rich traditions of the state. Amidst its many tribes, Nagaland is rich in the production of a variety of handloom products such as colourful and astonishing shawls, mekheles, bags, etc. with captivating details designed on them. Each tribe has distinguishable characteristics in terms of language, dress, customs and festivals. With agriculture being the state’s most important economic activity, 70% of the population depends on agriculture and a section of the population depends on home-based cottage industry. Cotton is found in abundance and so are the skills in producing textiles. Although the methods of processing, spinning and weaving cotton are simple the textures woven on the fabrics are complex. Each tribe has its motifs, designs and patterns which establish a unique identity for them. All the Naga tribes are particularly expressive in their indigenous craft with proficiency in basketry and bamboo crafts, wood-carving, textile weaving, metal spears, beads, jewellery and pottery.

Generally, handloom is an age-old traditional practice followed by every tribe of the state which has been passed on from generation to generation. It is a customary and social obligation of the Nagas

that every girl who attains the age of marriage should possess the ability to spin and weave. In fact, women were expected to weave at an early age for their family members. The old traditional practice of back-strap loom is used to weave cloths. This process is usually done by stretching the two parallel bamboos, one end tied to the wall or post and the other held by a strap at the waist by the weaver. The tension is regulated through the waist. The wrap is winded according to the intended design after the weaving is done. However, the traditions of weaving also differ from tribe to tribe. The hand-woven product thus carries the cultural significance of the community one belongs to.

The main handloom industrial area is located in the district of Dimapur because of the easy availability and accessibility of raw materials as well as its climatic conditions. All the types of equipment, raw materials and other necessities were provided to the weavers and training is given by the skilled weavers to the young girls. Mostly, it is the middle-aged women running handloom businesses by opening small cottage industries. The womenfolk's weavers are experts in stitching, weaving, design making, etc. Although the Naga attire mainly consists of a variety of patterns; the pattern for weaving can be further divided into grid, pattern and plain. Types of threads and yarn namely- Doli, Polyester, Thailand, Rayon, and Wool (2 ply, 4ply) were used for weaving.

In the present scenario, the Nagaland Handloom & Handicrafts Development Corporation Ltd. (NHHDC) located at Half Nagarjan in the commercial district of Dimapur which is initiated by the Dept. of Industries and Commerce, Government of Nagaland is serving its purpose with the objective to promote and develop the traditional handloom and handicrafts products of the state. The corporation has 10 sales Emporiums within and outside the state. They also distribute raw materials to the registered group of artisans to enhance the production of fixed bases. Further, procurement of finished goods is being carried out for sales through its own outlets i.e., Emporiums, organizing various Exhibitions, Fairs and Crafts Bazaars within and outside the state are actively carried out to provide a platform to artisans for promotion of their products and also to educate them about the intricacies of the marketing world. The corporation has also implemented several other welfare activities for the weavers and artisans to improve their socio-economic conditions.

As per the Third National Handloom Census of Weavers and Allied Workers 2010, Nagaland has 60891 total handloom household workers, 66490 no. of handloom weavers and allied workers and 47688 no. of looms. Nagaland along with the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, and Tripura contributes 82% of the domestic loom age of NER states. However, only 13.4% of the

commercial loom of the country is in these five states. The handloom fabrics range from shawls, mekkelas, traditional bags, mufflers, dresses, etc.

Today, the handloom industry is undergoing a lot of changes with the necessity to meet the requirements of the consumers as per their changing preferences and tastes in handloom products. The hand-woven products are transformed into the making of modern ethnic wears such as neckties, waistcoats, mufflers, skirts, scarves, modern dresses and bags and so on.

SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOOD FRAMEWORKS OF WEAVERS IN KIKRUMA VILLAGE

In ancient times, the practice of weaving is considered the primary means of livelihood among rural people. Cloths are woven not only for the use of the family members but some extra pieces were also weaved for exchange with other commodities as a part of the barter system. Sometimes, women also used to sell clothes for buying ornaments. Women's ornaments (necklaces, earrings, bracelets, armlets, belts etc) back in the day were considered a treasured possession and held with great pride and value. These ornaments and clothes carry with them deep significance and honour which were passed down from the mother to her daughter from generation to generation.

Handloom is limited as a profession for women, so girl children have been taught the art of weaving to furnish apparel to the family. In course of time, she mastered the earlier learned skills and produce intricately appealing and colourful fabrics. Weaving is principally done by the use of simple pieces of equipment and during one's leisure time. A unique feature of this industry is that it does not require any mechanical tools for production. Loin loom or back straps is the old traditional method used for weaving cloth.

Traditionally, a person's social status is determined by the kind of dresses they wear. Every little detail of the woven designs and colours represents a significant meaning. The purpose of weaving not only serves as a means of economic sustenance, but it has a cultural symbolism attached to it. The glorious past of the community, the achievements, inclinations, inspirations and all sorts were preserved in the hand-woven designs.

Restrictions

There is no particular community or tribe associated with the craft of weaving in Nagaland, both the weavers and non-weavers enjoy equal social status and privileges and participate in social

ceremonies. However, an interesting belief of the locals in olden times is the restriction of male participation in weaving. They were inclined to a superstitious belief that if a male does the weaving which is generally done by women, they will encounter defeat in war and failure in hunting etc. As far as weaving is concerned, they were even forbidden to touch the pieces of equipment the women. Being a patriarchal society, whenever the participation of men is required in any important community gatherings, festivals or occasions, weaving on that particular day is strictly forbidden, and men can even go to the extent of ripping apart the unfinished weaving cloth and damaging the equipment of the concerned person if one is found to be doing so.

Raw materials

The basic raw materials used in weaving include cotton, silk and woollen yarns. The bulk of raw materials is bought from the local markets. Mostly, the yarns were procured from local markets in the nearby towns, which were imported from outside the state by the merchants as per the requirements of the weavers. Earlier, the Cotton and Stinging Nettle (*Urtica dioica*) plant serve as the most basic available raw materials to the weavers. Cotton was grown in the villages in patches of land while the Nettle stinging plant was found in abundance. These raw materials were then transformed into yarns while undergoing several procedures. Spinning, weaving and dyeing of the fabrics were followed up involving great artistic skills. Types of threads like Doli, Polyester, Thailand and 2 ply, 3ply and 4ply etc. were used in weaving.

Manufacturing processes

Handloom weavers in rural areas economically belong to the agricultural sector of society.

With the increase in market forces, the rural-urban linkages have enormously influenced the livelihood strategies of local weavers. The competition in production between power loom and handloom products is a factor which is affecting the handloom credibility of the weavers particularly. Disregard this, the hand-woven products are more preferred by the customers and hold a higher value.

In terms of market functionaries, the woven textiles are mainly sold to:

1. Non-practising households.
2. Job holders residing in both villages and towns.
3. Village community members during special occasions, gatherings and festivals.

Although the season for the production of handloom cannot be fully determined as it depends on the demands of the customers. There is an increase in higher demands for handloom products during community gatherings and festivals.

The productions of handloom have seen changes in terms of a better quality of threads, well-furnished weaving, types of equipment, higher income and development of new ideas for cloth designs.

Sustainability

The handloom sector serves as a source of livelihood for both educated and illiterate weavers.

The woven products are sold an average of every once or thrice in a while, depending on the demands of the customers. The earnings depend on the nature of the work. As such, depending on the products prices are determined. The prices for the finished products range from Rs 300-500/- for traditional mufflers, and Rs 5000-10,000/- for traditional shawls and mekhela sets. The “Naga Shawl” was priced at Rs 12,000/-.

However, the pricing of the products differs from one owner to another depending upon the quality, consumption of time, money and labour they put into it.

By selling these products, the weavers used it to buy raw materials for the preparation of the next weave, maintain the basic requirements of their family necessities, and fulfil the child’s educational needs, clear off their debts and so on.

Weaving is not considered a full-time profession. Almost all the workers are engaged in some kind of agricultural activity. Besides, some weavers are also engaged in private and government jobs.

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES OF THE HANDLOOM INDUSTRY

The handloom industry no doubt has been struggling for its survival for a long. Although particularly based mostly in rural areas, this industry is slowly deteriorating due to several factors:

1. **Marketing issues**-Due to the unavailability of marketing facilities and resources, the weaves are accumulated in stocks for a long period resulting in unemployment among the weavers. Since there are no proper linkages for marketing the products, weavers are facing difficulty in selling their products more effectively.

2. **The rising cost of production**- A major challenge in the handloom industry is the rising cost of production. In recent years, the prices of yarns are rising at a phenomenal rate. Since the rural weavers are mostly marginal weavers, so high cost of production affects them economically. With the high cost of production, weavers are unable to meet the requirements of the products.
3. **Health issues**-Since handloom is very strenuous and tedious work, weavers are prone to several health weaknesses. Some major health issue arising out of this includes backache, muscle and joint pain, stomach ache and eyesight weakening.
4. **Family responsibility**-Individual weaver's in some houses weave to maintain the economic stability of the family. However, the need to look after the family's responsibilities like household chores and other agricultural activities were some of the major problems hindering the women weavers from fully dedicating their time to weaving. These types of weavers usually weave during their leisure time which adds to why women cannot take up the job of weaving professionally.
5. **Lack of awareness of schemes**-Lack of awareness about the implementation of various government schemes for the weavers is another significant issue among the handloom community. Ultimately, it makes the policy formulation unproductive and discourages the growth of its development.

CONCLUSION

Handloom is a part of the Naga's cultural identity and this indigenous practice if promoted to a wider market can largely benefit the rural women weavers. Handloom is the only industry which has maintained and preserved the ancient craft even today. The traditional handloom industry has great potential to make it big within the small-scale industry. It is mostly practised in the rural setting and monopolized by the womenfolk. The traditional handloom industry address issues relating to marketing facilities, the rising cost of production, family responsibilities, health issues and so on. This sector helps in getting social recognition to the respective producer community and thereby maintaining social stability and harmony in the rural livelihood. They also help in exhibiting the glory and achievements of their native places.

This traditional handloom practice has and is still given utmost priority by the tribals as it is a part of their cultural identity and is what makes them unique from others. These practices have been followed since ancient times due to their various significance whereas the art of handloom was simpler and produced was less complex. Today, we witness many new additions in the handloom products which are made to meet the needs and demands of the people. The industry is unique in its way and it requires no form of mechanical energy. It works completely in the skilled hands of a human.

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