

Handloom weaving, the traditional craft of Manipur

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Hand woven textiles have always been a rich source of one's tradition. In the Northeast region of India, each tribe or community has its own specific designs and motifs. Manipur enjoys a distinct place amongst textiles zones in India. Women folk are practicing weaving in Manipur. The crafts is woven with culture and spiritual beliefs of the natives of Manipur since time immemorial. But due to social changes incorporated with modern technology, the traditional hand woven textiles of Manipur are few to be found and they are rapidly changing in terms of designs, motifs, yarns and processes. The study was an attempt towards the preservation of the textiles before they are completely depleted. The main objective was to document the hand woven textiles of Manipur. The related data was collected purposively from three selected villages by using observation cum interview method.

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India has one of the richest traditions of woven textiles manufactured from wide range of different materials using variety of weaving techniques for both functional and aesthetic purpose. Northeast refers to the easternmost region of India which is linguistically and culturally very distinct from the other states of India. A large number of inhabitants speak Tibeto-Burman languages and have cultural similarities with Southeast Asia. The physical setting, climate, flora and fauna, population and settlements are responsible for the uniqueness of textiles when compared with those woven textiles by the other states of the country. Within this region there is a distinct difference between the weaving of the hill tribes and that carried out by people living in the plains. The hill tribes weave usually on the back strap loin loom whereas, frame loom were used by the native of plains. Handloom and handicraft are important home and cottage industries taken up by the people¹⁻⁶. Among the women folk, the weaving craft is the traditional occupation of the region. The growth of the handicrafts and textiles is related to socio-religious functions and imbued with their philosophy of life. Manipur is surrounded by hills spread an area of 22,356 sq km and bound by Nagaland to the North,

Mayanmar to East, Cachar district of Assam on the West and hills of Mizoram to its South. The place became the home of more than 30 ethnic groups at historical time with varying responses to the changing geo-cultural environment. The name of Manipur has become almost synonymous with the fascinating dances and colourful handloom textiles.

Khwang Iyong (loin loom) is traditional form of a weaving loom in Manipur. Since 11th century *Pang Iyong* (throw shuttle loom) began to be used in Manipur. At that time Chinese silk was the most important item of all trading articles in Manipur and the *Meitei* women were particularly engaged in the production of silk textiles. In 1921, fly shuttle loom was introduced in Manipur by Hairen Keifa Singh Selungba, an expert craftsman of Yaishkul Hiroohanba Leikai, Imphal. Weaving in Manipur is a time honoured occupation, fine tuned to an art from with its intricate designs. Women undertook weaving as a part of their domestic chores. The handloom industry has been playing a vital role in the state economy. Apart from agriculture, handloom weaving provides highest employment to the women folk of the state. Unfortunately, due to the demands of modern society and adverse living condition, weavers are facing lots of problem in terms of production, investment, market potential, etc. Hence, there is a

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need to promote the weaving industry of the state. The study is an attempt to document the art of weaving in Manipur.

Methodology

A structured interview with schedule was developed with close and open ended questions. It consisted of questions related to general information of the weavers, weaving process with regard to looms, weaves, yarns, motifs and colours used in hand woven textiles of Manipur and marketing process. A multistage stratified sampling method was adopted for the study. Three places in Imphal, i.e. Uchekon, Bashikhong and Kiyamgei were purposively selected. Total samples of 150 (50 weavers from each place) were selected, Criteria set for sample selection were only one respondent from each family; the age of weavers may be either below 60 yrs or above; and one of the members should be above 60 yrs of age, who practiced weaving at one stage.

Results and discussion

The majority of weavers interviewed were of the age between 26-36 yrs, who were Hindus and *Meitei* and lived mostly in extended family system. They lived in *kaccha* and *semi pacca* houses with spacious loom shed. Weaving was the main source of income followed by agriculture and other activities. Due to power loom, now handloom weaving does not fetch sustainable income and since past couple of yrs, weaving has been a secondary source of their income. The youngsters started learning the craft by observing their parents initially and got involved into various simple weaving processes. Girls initiate into weaving at their tender age of 10 yrs having mastered over the years and practice throughout their life span. They were involved in this craft not only for their domestic use but it was their main source of income. They willingly wove both traditional design as well as stylized designs. This reflected on the urge to earn more and also they wanted to show their innovative talent but three old weavers adhered to traditional designs only. Besides being old experienced weavers in traditional weaving, they expressed their concerned to preserve the traditional craft and culture. Their education level was between primary and secondary school. Poverty was the main reason of discontinuation of study.

Tools and equipments

Traditionally, a loom was a part of each girl's dowry. The primary qualification of a young girl for eligibility to marriage was determined by her weaving skill. It is said that a *Meitei* women grow up with weaving and she carries the weaving implements to her in-law's house after marriage. Thus, each house in Manipur has at least one loom. During the survey, it was found that loin loom was no more in use in all the 3 villages. They used throw shuttle loom (traditional loom) and fly shuttle loom (Figs. 1&2) and owned the looms. Loom was an integral part of their household furniture. All the weavers did maintain looms in good condition which were not fixed to the ground, but were portable to be shifted as and when necessary. There was very little change in the existing weaving tools as compared with the past. They still use bamboo and wooden spools, *Tareng* (wooden charkha) etc. (Figs. 3-5). The wooden spools used for weaving was replaced by plastic ones (Fig. 6). *Tawot*, a tool for preparing hank (Fig. 7) was not at all in use during the time of data collection, which indicates its extinction. Besides this, other tools and equipment required for weaving were shuttles, heddles, *singkap* (Figs. 8-11), etc. Traditionally, these were made with wood or bamboo except heddles, which were made of cotton yarn and bamboo reed was used for throw shuttle loom. The selection of the heddles depended on the types of yarns used for weaving as it protected rust mark on fabric or split in fine yarn. Small plastic spools which were made from waste material like sketch pencil or ball pen were used for extra weft designing. But to weave thick fabric with one ply or two ply acrylic yarns on fly shuttle loom, metal heddles and both plastic and wooden spools were used.

Weaving

Designs were drawn by the weavers or sometimes copied from printed textiles such as *saree*, bed sheets, etc. The designs were drawn on tracing paper or regular paper by applying kerosene oil on it which was then inserted between the warp yarns. The number of extra weft yarns depended on the type of design and fabric to be woven (Figs. 12-14). Traditionally, to bleach cow dung and *phijuhidak* (a traditional powder made from plant) were used but this practice no more exists, since it was time consuming. Detergent and blue such as *neem* were used for bleaching warps, wefts and fabric. Rice and



Fig.1 Throw shuttle loom



Fig.2 Fly shuttle loom



Fig.3 Tareng (Charkha)



Fig.4 Bamboo spools



Fig.5 Wooden spools



Fig.6 Plastic spools



Fig.7 Tawot



Fig.8 Spools used for throw shuttle loom



Fig.9 Spools used for fly shuttle loom

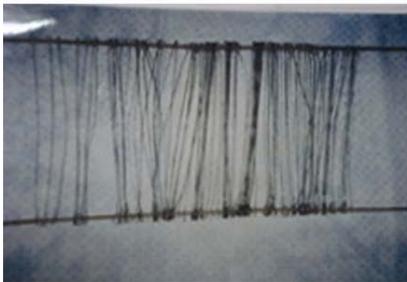


Fig.10 Metal heddles



Fig.11 Singkap



Fig.12 Transferring the design on paper



Fig.13 Designs transferred to warp yarn



Fig.14 Way of inserting extra weft design



Fig.15 Lamthang Khut-hat



Fig.16 Lindo Mayek



Fig.17 Shami-lammi phi



Fig.18 Ningkham Khoi Mayek



Fig. 19 Single ply Acrylic scarf



Fig.20 Single ply acrylic bed sheet cover



Fig.21 Rani phee



Fig.22 Wangkhei phee



Fig.23 Single ply acrylic scarf



Fig.24 Leirum

maida powder was used for sizing. During earlier times, the warps used for weaving textiles were mainly cotton and *Kabrang* (mulberry silk). Most of the villages not only wove cotton but also cultivated and spun yarn on hand *charkha* known as *Tareng*. Since very early times, women of Manipur valley practiced dyeing yarns and fabric using natural dyes. Dyes were extracted from leaves, roots or barks of different plant sources. The dye paste was prepared by the use of traditional technology to obtain various colour palettes which was more or less colour fast. However, this traditional process is no longer used. As reported by local dyers, vat and naphthol dyes for cotton and sulphur dyes were

used since they added variety of shades and hues. Vat and naphthol dyes were used to dye expensive cotton yarn and direct dyes to dye low grade cotton yarns. Silk was dyed with acid dyes. They used *muga* silk to weave *Rani phee* (women *chaddar*) and cotton was used to weave *Wangkhei phee*. Where as employed Kinar yarn and DMC (local name for yarn) were used for extra weft pattern, two ply acrylic yarn for scarf and bed sheet. In earlier days, silk yarns were used for extra weft design on silk cloth which was now replaced by *Kinar* to lower down the selling price of the *phee* as well as increase the production. All the fabrics were mostly woven in plain weave.

Colour, motifs and products

The animal or insect motifs such as *Lamthang khut-hat* (a snake design), *Lindo mayek* (snake design) and *Shami-lami phi*, *Ningkhram Khoi mayek* (Figs. 15-18) *Sangai* (a deer design), butterfly, *Wahong* (a peacock motif), fish design, etc. and floral motifs such as *kundo* (jasmine), *Attar gulab* (rose motif), *Leihao* (champa) were common motifs used to weave in earlier days. But today, mostly modified forms of floral motifs are in trend. There was no specific name of these motifs as they were copied from printed design or self designed. Sometimes the weavers created a new design by modifying a part of the design such as leaf, petal from the original motif/design. Now-a-days, they wove *phanek* (sarong), *khudei* (lungi), bed sheets, *phoe matek* (chaddar), *Rani phoe* (chaddar), scarf, salwar piece, *kanghan*, *phanek mayek naiba* (a colour stripe sarong), *Moirang phijanba phoe matek* (women's chaddar) and *Leirum* (a shawl) (Figs. 19-24). Besides traditional colour palette, today all colours were used. Light colour such as light yellow, light brown, white, off white or light sky blue were in trend.

Marketing of the textiles

Now-a-days, the weavers purchased yarns from market directly. The wholesale dealers in the local market purchased silk in bulk from Bangalore, Mysore and then supplied it to the weavers. Weavers were still dealing directly with the consumers or wholesaler for trading rather than marketing through co-operative store, middle man or door to door. They generally got job work for weaving either weekly or fortnightly order.

Conclusion

Results of the study revealed that the weaving was practiced only by women folk. During the period of

data collection it was rare to locate any form of traditional textiles among the respondents. Only few weavers had some textiles which were in very poor condition. Majority of the weavers were not aware of the textiles worn & possessed by their parents and grand parents yet, produces the craft of weaving with ancient looms such as throw shuttle & fly shuttle loom & other tools & equipments such as *charkha* (*Tareng*), shuttle or spools. Traditional dyes have been completely replaced by imported synthetic dyes, but for sizing, they still use rice the traditional ingredient. The influences of consumer's demand & trends have changed the traditional textiles in terms of yarns, motifs & designs, to such an extent that many traditional textiles have become extinct. This reflects the impact of the global market on the handloom weaving of Manipur. The study focuses on the condition of weavers & the woven traditional craft. In lieu of the above, there is a need of the hour to initiate and plan cluster development programme for the weavers to facilitate preservation of textiles and there by improve the socio-economic condition of the weavers for whom weaving is the main source of income.

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