

Design and development of fashion accessories inspired from the hand woven shawls of Nagaland

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The *Nagas*, inhabitants of Nagaland, are said to belong to the Indo-Mongoloid stock. Unlike other parts of India, where much of the spinning and weaving, is in the hands of men, in Nagaland it is exclusively the monopoly of women. They mainly weave shawls and *mekhalas* which range from a simple white cloth to elaborately designed ones. These textiles are mainly produced only for their own consumption and available in the local markets. These textile products require more visibility, which can be achieved through contemporary product design and value addition through design development which can lead to better and wider market acceptability and network. Therefore, the present study was undertaken with the major objective of documenting the history, origin, weaving techniques, motifs and significance of the hand woven shawls of the three tribes of the state, i.e. *Ao*, *Chakhesang* and *Lotha* and then designing fashion accessories inspired from the hand woven textiles and ornaments of Nagaland. Inspired from these textiles fashion accessories, i.e. bags, belts and neckwear were designed and constructed and its market acceptability was studied. The study revealed that the products were highly appealing in the market and there was lot of scope to develop such products. The respondents and shopkeepers also acknowledged that the attempt was very innovative and creative to make people aware of the textiles of Nagaland and the study helped uplift, preserve and popularize the hand woven textiles of the state by product diversification.

Keywords: Hand woven tribal shawls, *Ao*, *Chakhesang*, *Lotha*, Product diversification

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The North Eastern India, known as, “*The Land of Seven Sisters*”, is a unique land which is home of various ethnic groups. It may be considered as a mini world or a replica of our planet, since almost all the worlds’ religions, cultures and ethnicity exists here. Nagaland is one of the seven states and is encircled by Assam in the North and West, Myanmar and Arunachal Pradesh in the East and Manipur in the South. The *Nagas*, inhabitants of Nagaland, are said to belong to the Indo-Mongoloid stock, a race whose presence was first noted ten centuries before Christ, at the time of the compilation of the Vedas. The capital of Nagaland is Kohima and it is one of the smallest states of India with a total area of 16,579 sq km, inhabited by 1.988 million people (census 2001). It is one of the three Christian majority states in India with a literacy rate of 67% and English is the official language of the state¹.

Along with agriculture; cottage industries such as weaving, woodwork and pottery are an important source of income. *Naga* methods of processing,

spinning and weaving cotton are simple, but the motifs, designs and patterns that are woven are quite complex. Unlike other parts of India, where much of the spinning and weaving, is in the hands of men, spinning and weaving in Nagaland is the exclusive monopoly of women. The loom used is a simple and inexpensive back strap loom that can be handled by a single woman. The *Nagas* are best known for their shawls in which three or more pieces are woven separately and then stitched together. They mainly weave *mekhalas* (wrap around skirt) and shawls which range from a simple white cloth to elaborately designed ones, for the warriors or the rich segments, within the tribes. There is a distinction between classes on the basis of the shawls they wear².

Traditions and cultures are the two main conduit pipes through which one can easily identify different systems of the people and their societies³. India has a diverse and rich textile tradition and at presents the world’s largest producer of handloom products with a total production of more than 6200 millions meters of clothes. It has been estimated that at present there are about 43.31 lakh people dependent on handloom

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weaving with approximately 23.77 lakh handlooms. The handloom sector is the oldest of the entire textile sector in India, giving employment to 35%, and yet barely accounts for 16% of total textile production, is currently facing unprecedented challenges. In north eastern states there are more than 18, 00,000 domestic handlooms. And so to keep this sector alive and vibrant there is a constant need for innovation, research, product and design development of these handloom products⁵. In handloom sector the old techniques of weaving, printing, dyeing, embroideries, etc. could be revived by training the local artesian or new people in the art and skills. To create new trends for the market, in order to generate workforce.

Therefore, the present study has been undertaken to study the hand woven textiles of Nagaland. Fashion accessories were produced to increase market acceptability and improve economic standard of weavers through spreading this traditional textiles.

Methodology

The present study aimed to document the hand woven textiles of the selected three tribes of Nagaland namely *Ao*, *Chakhesang* and *Lotha*. To achieve this aim, a descriptive research design was planned. A questionnaire was framed and purposive sampling method was followed for data collection with the help of observation and interview method and photographic documentation. The questions dealt with the demographic details, technique of weaving, loom, yarns, raw materials, colours, motifs and its significance, the products produced and marketing of the products.

The study also focused on the designing and development of fashion accessories inspired from the hand woven textiles of Nagaland. These products were bags of three sizes, belts and neckwear of three different types. Textiles for the products were woven from the weavers of the state during data collection. Since, Nagaland is also famous for its cane and basketry work these crafts were incorporated in the accessories. Leather too was included in the products to increase its appeal and give a diverse and unique look. The embellishment on the products was inspired from the ornaments of the *Naga* people. The designing of the accessories was carried out under three categories, A, B and C for *Ao*, *Chakhesang* and *Lotha* tribes, respectively. All the bags, belts and neckwear were of different shapes and designs and hence in each category all the nine products were



Fig. 1—Map of geographical area of sample under study

diverse and unique. The products were then evaluated for colour appropriateness, placement of the motifs and overall aesthetic appeal and market acceptance by 50 respondents through a questionnaire. A likert scale was used for computing the scores and also percentages were calculated for data analysis.

Results

Hand woven shawls of Nagaland

The three different tribes studied were *Ao*, *Chakhesang* and *Lotha* from Mokokchung, Dimapur and Wokha districts, respectively (Fig. 1). All the respondents followed Christianity and spoke their own tribal languages, i.e. *Ao*, *Chakri* & *Kheza*, and *Lotha*. It was known during the data collection that weaving in Nagaland is the monopoly of women. Men were not allowed to practice this art, as weaving was considered to be a household task. Men were involved in outdoor activities like hunting and farming and helping women at home was not considered appropriate. Most of the weavers had joint families living in both *kachcha* and *pakka* concrete and tin houses, with their parents, in laws and children. Weaving is normally done outside the house under shade after getting free from the household chores (Fig. 2). The weaver, in the weaving process, was helped by any other woman member of the family, be her daughter, mother or mother-in-law. The looms used by the weavers were the back strap looms although earlier loin looms and pit looms were also used. The average width of a back strap loom was between 27"-42" while the length varied according to the seat and posture of the weaver and also on the length of the textile woven. These looms were made



Fig. 2—Tribal women at work on the looms in their homes

by the men folk at home, from the wood available in and around their houses.

The raw material needed for weaving was obtained from the local market of the village or from other states, like Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. Cotton, wool and viscose rayon yarns of one, two or four ply are used. Hence, the thickness of the yarns depends on its ply. Traditionally they did not mix two types of yarns in one textile however now it is quite common. Artisans wove fabrics for varieties of end uses like shawls, *mekhala*, carry bags and waistcoats. Each house had one, two or more looms which was a back strap loom. It takes around 15-30 days for the weaver to complete one shawl. These shawls have plain weave with floats at some places and also show the effect of rib weave.

Ao Naga

Ao Naga's are the people of *Ao* tribe considered to have the highest literacy rate in Nagaland today. They call themselves *Aor*. *Ao's* are mainly located in Mokokchung district bound by Dikhu river. *Ao* tradition states quite definitely that the ancestors of the tribe came out of the earth at Longterok (6 stones) lying on the top of a spur on the right bank of Dikhu.

Ao tribe Shawls, Motifs and its Symbolism

The traditional colours used in the *Ao* tribe are red, black and white in shawls and blue color is used in the skirts of ladies. From the literature it was found that, earlier natural dyes obtained from plants were used, now-a-days they are using synthetic dyes.

The decorative warrior shawl *Tsungkotepsu*, is one of the most characteristic cloths of the *Aos*. On a general dark base, the cloth has a median white band

and on either side of it are horizontal bands of contrasting black, red and white. There are 5 or more broad red bands close together at the top and bottom, 6 narrow red bands close to the broad white median band. The median band is painted with a pattern in black which includes figures of bison symbolizing wealth of the owner, elephant and tiger to symbolize valour of the man, human head representing the success in head hunting and a few other things like spear, *dao* and cock. This is an exclusive male shawl, which could be worn only by one who has taken heads in war or offered *mithuns* (bison) sacrifice.

The *Chuchusubangsu* shawl can be worn by men of *Mulir* clan as of right. The cloth itself is red with very narrow dark blue bands and a broad white median band embroidered with large red lozenge. The blue bands indicate that the wearer has not only taken heads in war, but performed feast of merit. Another shawl worn on festive occasions by men of wealth or the sons and daughters of wealthy men is *Aomelep su*, in which dog's hair dyed red is woven in stripes of red, yellow and black alternating.

Rongsu shawl is one of the most decorative *Ao* cloths and the most difficult to earn the right of wearing it, for it can be worn only by a man whose grandfather and father or himself have done the *mithuns* sacrifice.

Other shawls consist of *Tiongkong su* having each side of the centre a red band with black streaks but the central narrow breadth is woven of dogs hair dyed red and uncolored thread; *Tabensa su* having red and black stripes, but black predominant; *Lungkhum subang* with red edge on two sides, a white stripe in the centre, but main part black; *Bangmerem su* having

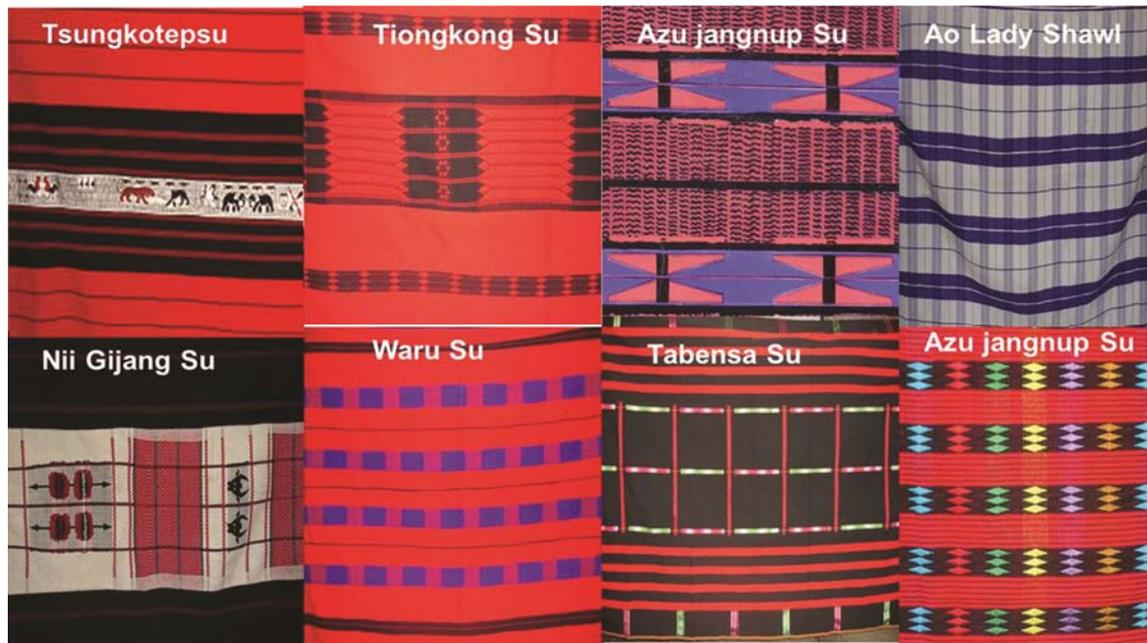


Fig. 3—Ao Naga tribal hand woven shawls



Fig. 4—Ao Naga tribal motifs

red and white bands at the two sides and central part white; *Keyi su* with red and white stripes alternating (Fig. 3). Some of the important and popular Ao skirts include *Azu jangnup su* mostly of red and black stripes with a little yellow in the black stripes.

The motifs used by the *Ao Nagas* are, *Mithun*, Elephant, Tiger, Human head, Spear & Dao, Cock, Hornbill and *Nii Gijang Su* (Bison head with spear) (Fig. 4). These traditional motifs have their own significance. *Mithun* in English is known as *Bison*. It

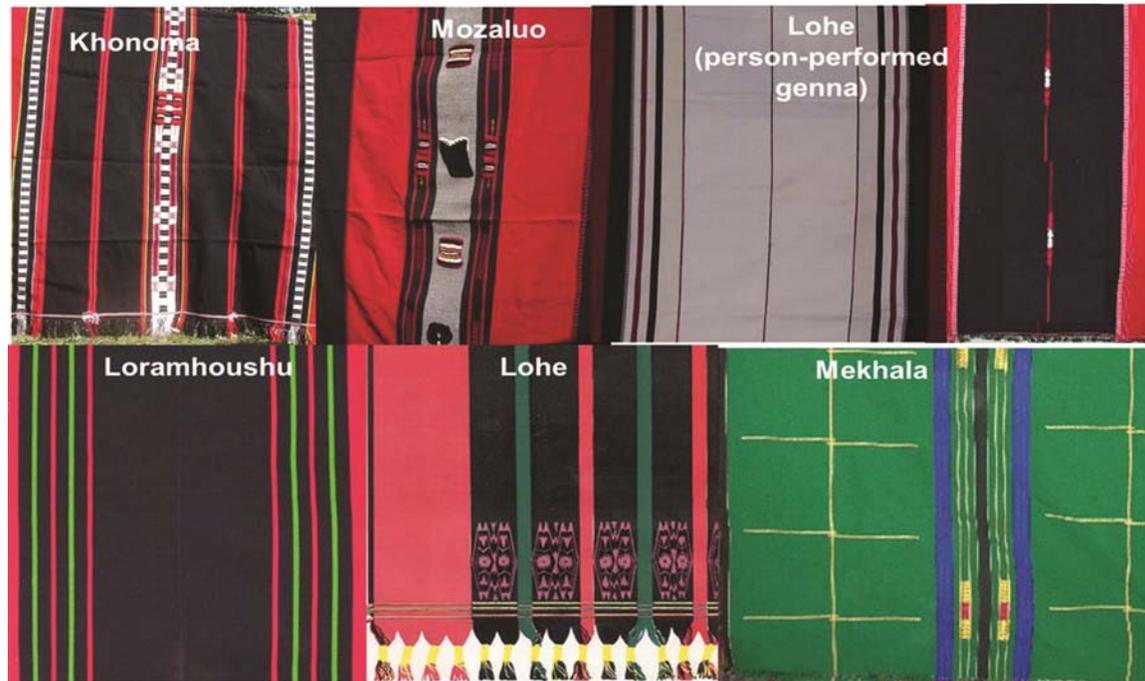


Fig. 5—Chakhesang Naga tribal hand woven shawls

signifies the wealth of the owner. Its horns too are used as a decorative motif in many different forms. Very often the *mithun* head and its horns are placed above the house to honour a dead warrior. The bulky elephant symbolizes conquest of spirit over matter. Tiger symbolizes valour and bravery of the man and so is used only on men's shawls. Human head represents the success in head-hunting. Spear & Dao shows weapons used by warriors. Cock signifies their domestic animal. Hornbill considered as their traditional bird. Cowrie shells were also used to ornament the shawls.

Chakhesang Naga

The word 'Chakhesang' is an acronym formed by letters derived from the names of three tribes; the word 'Cha' from 'Chakru', 'Khe' from 'Kheza' and 'Sang' from 'Sangtam'. Chakhesang Nagas, till recently known as Eastern Angamis were considered as part of Angami tribe. The dress is an important aspect of the society. They are good carpenters and extremely good in cane and bamboo work. They use loin loom or Indonesian tension loom for weaving. They are also good in manufacturing brass wares, the ornaments in particular.

Chakhesang Shawls, Motifs and its Symbolism

The traditional colors used in the Chakhesang tribe are red, black, white, green and yellow. From the

literature it was found that red color dye was prepared from the plants like *tsenyhu*, *aozu*, *tangshi* and *tangmo*. While yellow color was made from plants such as *athuo* and *akhung*. *Khonoma Shawl*, the most common warrior shawl of the Chakhesang tribe. The shawl has a spear motif which signifies bravery in war and hence is used in men's shawl only. The *Mozaluo shawl* too is a warrior shawl and has spear motif woven on it along with a motif similar to piece of flesh.

Loramhoushu is a cloth with white, red and black bands and the one with black with red and yellow bands is called *Lohe*. Green coloured stripes are also seen these days in the modern shawls. *Loramhoushu* is generally of 1 m and 85 cm long, and 1 m and 8 cm wide with 4 black bands at the margins close together on both the edges, each band about 2.5 cm wide. The size of *Lohe* is also same as *Loramhoushu* and the breadth of the red band at the margins is 2.5 cm (Fig. 5). The motifs used by the Chakhesang Nagas are, spear motif, diamond motif, *Nii Kongra* and flesh motif (Fig. 6). The *spear* in the Chakhesang shawls signifies bravery. And hence is used only in men's shawls who have been a warrior. *Diamond motif* is widely used in the Naga textiles as a symbol of aesthetic beauty and of auspicious things as it is a precious stone. The V-shape *Nii Kongra* motif signifies a weapon used for shooting arrows in the war. The *flesh motif* resembles piece of a flesh and hence signifies the dead humans in the war.



Fig. 6—Chakhesang Naga tribal hand woven shawls

Chakhesangs wear a sort of black shawl embroidered with cowries in 3 or 4 lines. The fourth line denotes prowess not in war, but in love and may be worn by anyone of the four following achievements- married woman living with her husband, two girls of the same name, two daughters of one father and mother and her daughter.

Lotha Naga

The *Lotha* are a major *Naga* community. *Lotha Naga* tribes are concentrated in Wokha district of present Nagaland, bounded by the districts of Mokokchung in the North, Zunheboto in the East, Kohima in the South and Assam in the West. *Lothas* call themselves as “*Kyon*” meaning simply “man”. *Lothas* are one of the most colorful tribes in India. Their main profession is agriculture while they have wonderful workmanship in carpentry, cane and bamboo work and weaving. The tribe is a tribe of festival and ceremonies.

Lotha Shawls, Motifs and its Symbolism

The traditional colours preferred by the *Lotha* tribe are red, black, white, green, blue, pink, yellow, etc. There are a number of colours used in this tribe and hence the tribe is considered to be one of the most colourful tribes of the state. *Lotha* shawls are also of

several patterns and indicate the number of social *gennas* (a social gathering performed to attain certain status) performed by the wearer. The ordinary shawl of the *Lotha* is known as *Sutam*, a white cloth with broad dark blue horizontal stripes worn by boys and men who have performed no social *gennas*.

The *Phangrup shawl*, a dark blue cloth, edged with broad bands of red with a broad stripe running across the middle of the cloth parallel with the red stripes. A northern *Lotha*, who has performed both the first social *genna* and the head taking ceremony, wears a cloth namely *Chamthe*, which is exactly like the *Phangrup*, except that the median band, is pale blue instead of white. *Lothas* wear a cloth called *Ethasu* after performing the third social *genna* and is a dark blue cloth with four red bands at each of the two edges.

A man who has completed the series of social *genna* by dragging a stone wears a handsome cloth called *Lungpensu*, which is a dark blue with five bands of light blue about one inch broad, and three pairs of narrow lines of light blue at two edges. A man who has dragged a stone more than once has four or even five narrow lines in his cloth which is called *Eshamsu* (Fig. 7).

The skirt of an unmarried girl is a plain dark blue one. On marriage, she wears a pretty skirt called

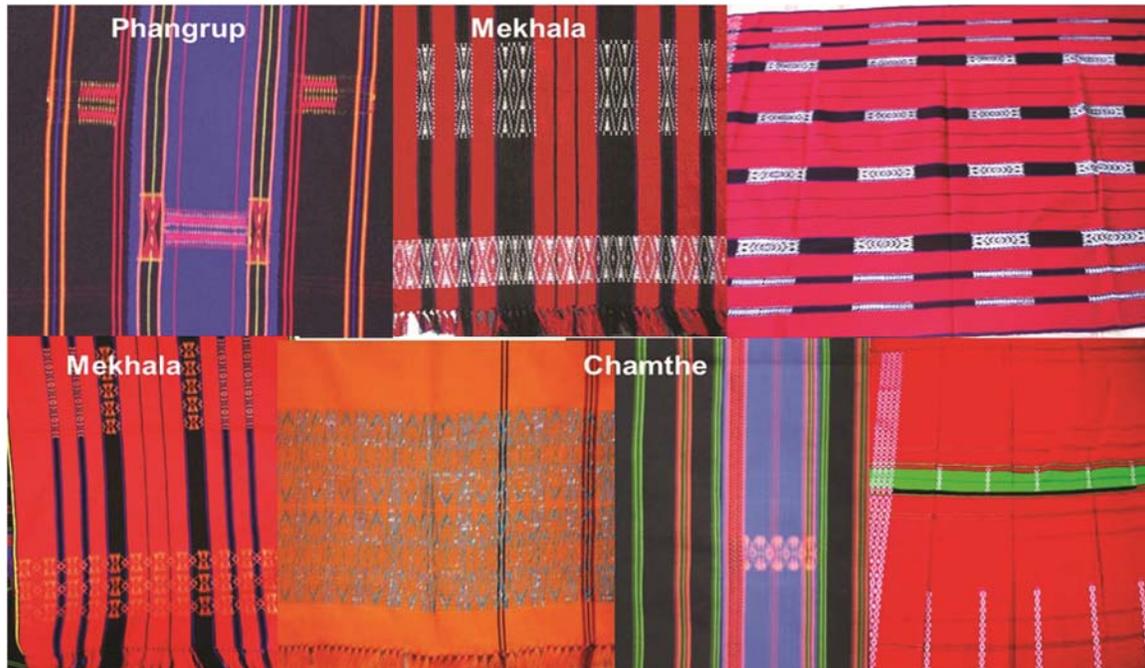


Fig. 7—Lotha Naga tribal hand woven shawls

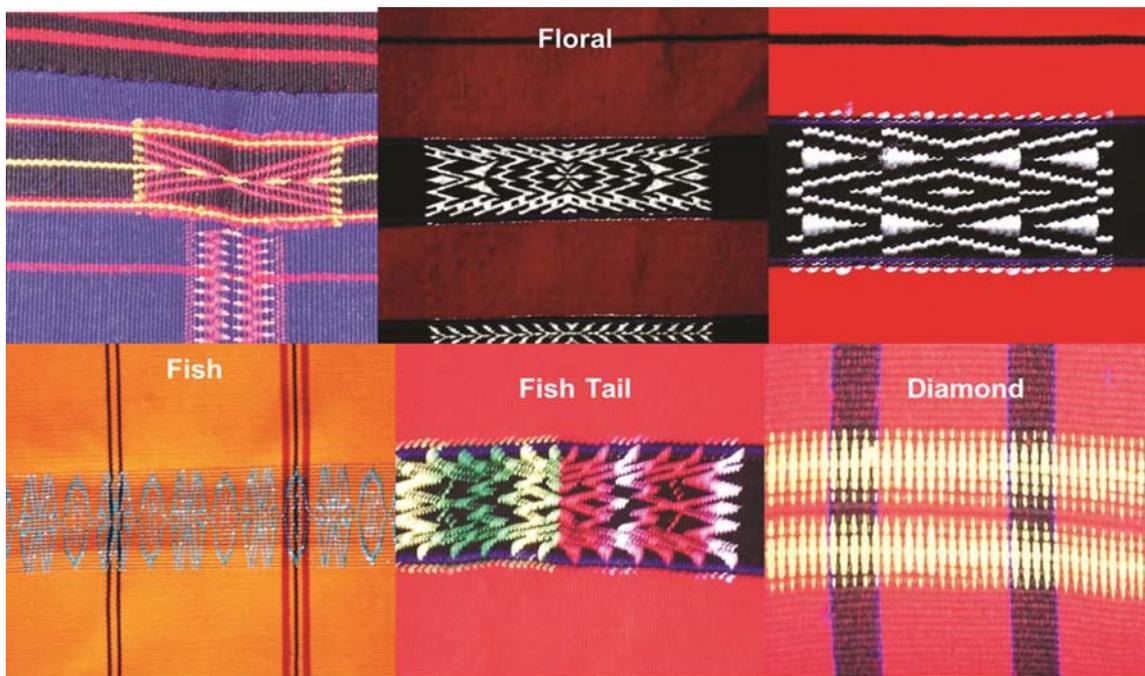


Fig. 8—Lotha Naga tribal hand woven shawls

Loroesu, dark blue with big squares of narrow white and red lines giving a sort of tartan effect. The motifs used by the *Lotha Nagas* are, fish tail motif which signifies good fortune and prosperity, diamond motif symbolizing aesthetic beauty and is considered as an auspicious stone, and flower motif showing the

different colours of the *Lotha* tribe (Fig. 8). Traditionally the *Naga* shawls were used merely as a wrap by both men and women. The women wrapped the shawls around their waist, called *Mekhala* (a wrap around long skirt) and the cotton fabric was used as shawl to cover their upper body and also to carry it as



Fig. 9—For accessories inspired from *Ao* tribal textiles category A

a stole. While the men used these shawls as a shoulder wrap to cover their body and protect from themselves from the external factors. Particular shawls were assigned to particular people. These textiles were worn through out the year at home as well as at special occasions and festivals. Because the cotton textiles were cool in summer and the woollen textiles provided warmth during winters.

The major colours of all the products of *Naga* people are red, white and black. The reason being, red was considered to be the colour of blood and war, as the *Nagas* were the head hunting tribes. White signified peace after the war and black was believed to symbolize the dark part of their lives.

In olden days, the *Nagas* wove textiles for their own personal use. There was no trend of weaving and selling the products in the market. These textiles were considered auspicious and had its traditional value and meaning. But now due to better market and lack of money to the weavers, these products are easily available in the local markets as well as in the state government outlets.

Designing fashion accessories using the hand woven textiles

Designing was done under three categories for the three tribes which had been studied as mentioned

earlier, i.e. nine sets in all. Category A included Set 1, 2 and 3 inspired from the *Ao* textiles (Fig. 9) and Category B Sets 4, 5 and 6 and Category C Sets 7, 8 and 9 from *Chakhesang* (Fig. 10) and *Lotha* textiles (Fig. 11) respectively. Each category had three sets of accessories under each tribe, which included a bag, a belt and neckwear. The bags, belts and neckwear were further sub divided into three types. Bags were of 3 sizes, i.e. small, medium and large. Belts included waist bands, broad belts and belts emphasizing buckles while neckwear had neckties, mufflers and shoulder wraps. Each category had all the 9 types of products with distinct designs and hence a total of 27 products were constructed. The product development was then evaluated by 50 respondents, who were teachers, Ph D Scholars, Master students in habiting from North Eastern states; for the best category, best set, best bags, belts and neckwear.

Preference for the best category

The scores indicated that category A, i.e. *Ao* tribe was ranked first by the respondents. The tribe was ranked the best because of the intricate motifs which the respondents felt were very interesting, mysterious, attractive, appealing, eye catchy and showed the traditional picture of the tribe. Following to this was category B, i.e. *Chakhesang* tribe which was ranked



Fig.10—Designs for accessories inspired from *Chakhesang* tribal textiles category B



Fig. 11—Designs for accessories inspired from *Lotha* tribal textiles category C

second and Category C, i.e. *Lotha* tribe was positioned at the third rank.

Preference for the best sets in the entire collection

For the best three sets in the entire collection, Set 2 from *Ao* tribe was ranked the best set among all the

nine followed by Set 1 of the same tribe. Because of the painted motifs the respondents felt the sets interesting and very attractive. The colour combination of the products was found excellent and justified, with a good blend of modern designs with



Fig. 12—Best three sets of the entire collection

ethnicity. Set 8 of the *Lotha* tribe was ranked third because most of the respondents liked the cane bag.

Preference for the best bags from the entire collection

Opinion for the best three bags among all the nine designed from the entire collection, showed that the best bag from the entire collection was A1 from *Ao* tribe, which was a small pouch bag, in the traditional colours i.e. red, white and black. The respondents liked the bag as they felt they were striking, appealing and proportionate. The second rank was occupied by A2, again from *Ao* tribe. The bag had a white panel at the centre which was found to be intricately painted, graphic and very attractive and appealing. The shape of the bag was termed to be chic and trendy. C2 occupied the third rank among all the nine. The bag was liked by many because of its combination of cane with fabric (Fig. 12).

Preference for the best belts from the entire collection

The best three belts among all the nine designed from the entire collection went to, Ac from *Ao* tribe, Bc from *Chakhesang* tribe was ranked second because many respondents liked the spear motif on the buckle of the belt. Belt Aa from *Ao* tribe got the third rank, and was liked by many because of the hand painted traditional motifs.

Preference for the best neckwear from the entire collection

Opinion for the best three neckwear went to Ai from *Ao* tribe, a black neck tie was ranked best. The respondents felt that with the black base and white

painted and embroidered traditional motifs. The second rank went to Biii, which was a necktie again. The spear motif patched on the white base was the centre of attraction. The shoulder wrap of *Ao* tribe, i.e. Aii was ranked third. The centre panel of white hand painted band, added to the exquisiteness of the wrap and the design of the neckwear coming out from a slit was considered by many to be unique and very innovative.

The opinions of the respondents with regard to product diversification of traditional hand woven textiles

- 100% respondents agreed that the traditional textiles should be commercialized by product diversification.
- 98% respondents agreed to the fact that the traditional crafts should be diversified to add value to the products, in order to revive and increase its consumption and marketability.
- 90% respondents preferred to go for the contemporary and ethnic accessories. While 10% respondents would prefer contemporary and western accessories.
- 96% respondents agreed to purchase products which would have the ethnic essence of traditional textiles.
- 90% of the respondents felt the textiles were effectively used in the designed products.
- 100% respondents agreed to buy the constructed products.

Overall the product development of the *Naga* shawls to fashion accessories was highly appreciated

by the respondents and they felt these products would have good market potential.

Conclusion

Weaving is an ancient craft of the people of Nagaland – be it weaving of cloth or cane. Each tribe uses distinguishing colours and motifs that are often based on tribal folklore. The art of hand weaving is still popular amongst the *Naga* women, especially in the rural areas. However the sector is beset with manifold problems such as obsolete technologies, unorganized production system, low productivity, inadequate working capital, conventional product range, weak marketing link, overall stagnation of production and sales and above all, competition from power loom and mill sector. If the traditional crafts are to sustain and be economically viable for the artisan, proper market research is the need of the hour.

It is our responsibility to preserve these heritage fabrics by facilitating training to designer's, spinner's

and weaver's to carry forward these techniques without distorting the original forms and techniques of the weaves and yet innovate and develop new products and garments range to help existing weaves to come up with new products.

Therefore, proper design inputs, research, new innovations (in techniques and products both) quality and standardization, combination of networking and new marketing strategy is needed to put the handloom industry in the fast track.

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