Study of Traditional handloom weaving by the Kom tribe of Manipur

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In the present paper traditional weaving and related knowledge system of purposively selected villages are discussed, and in this connection eight plant species are reported, which are used in weaving handloom. Kom tribe of Manipur has very rich traditional knowledge of crafts. These are the living testimonies of their traditional knowledge and aesthetic value, which they have inherited from their predecessors. The art of handloom weaving and the techniques they use are indeed admirable. But the Kom like any other tribal society has also been subjected to the challenges of modernization and open market. As a result many of their indigenous artistic works in making tools are now in danger. Therefore, every effort must be made to preserve this traditional knowledge so that they can carry on with their aesthetic beauty & knowledge into prosperity.

Keywords: Kom tribe, Handloom, Weaving, Manipur

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Clothing is the basic need of the mankind and as such that leads to the weaving of textiles since time immemorial. The woven textile in varied design thus came to replace the clothes made of bark of a tree and the skin of the animal, which was the symbol of wandering men for a considerable period of time in the history of mankind. Depending on the environmental condition man has been concerned with the making of utilitarian fabrics since a long time and also they came to discover that textile offered a good medium for expression of aesthetic genius.

In North Eastern states of India, Manipur enjoy a place for its rich heritage of artistic handloom products. There is an immensely rich tribal culture in this region. The beautiful hand woven products of this region reflect on the skills of individual weaver artisans. The richness in material culture is also reflected in their colourful & attractive dress and costume.1-4

Kom is one of 38 recognized scheduled tribes of Manipur (according to Constitution (Scheduled tribes) order (Amendment) Act, 2011). They belong to the Chin Kuki, one of the major two tribal groups of Manipur, i.e. Naga & Kuki. They are found distributed in 4 districts of the state - Churachandpur, Senapati, Chandel and Imphal East. According to the myth of their origin, their forefathers are believed to have come out through Khul (Cave). Karunpa came out wearing a stripped cloth made friend with a tiger as the clothes resembled its skin and killed the tiger.

The Kom people have traditionally lived in forest and as such forest have been their lifeline since time immemorial. They are mostly dependent on the forest resources and conserve their plant diversity by developing their own culture, custom, folktales, food, medicine and number of other plants for multifarious uses. They have a very rich heritage and culture.

This rich culture is inherited from their forefather and this has been passed from generation to another through oral traditions as well as day today traditional practices, customs, religious beliefs, log drums, feast of merit, food and drink, ornaments, agricultural implements, rituals and ceremonies, weaving, housing, clothing, rearing of domestic animals, etc. Traditionally, many of these items have been made from plant materials. This vast knowledge is still in practice and of great traditional value.

Materials and methods

Ethnobotanical survey was carried out during 2010-2012 at the selected villages (05 Nos.) namely Thayong, Sagang, Khoirentak, Kakching mantak and

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Sinam kom of Imphal East, Churachandpur, Chandel and Senapati district. Data were collected through direct interviews, observation and participation. Total sample of 40 (10 weavers from each village) were selected following the standard methodology with slight modification. Information regarding weavers, weaving process with regard to looms, yarn, motifs and colour used in handwoven textile were collected. Majority of weavers interviewed were the age group of 26-45 yrs. However persons mostly belonging to the age group above 50 have accurate information regarding their age old traditions. Participation in their feasts, festivals other social events, etc. was of great help in collecting the information.

**Study area**

Kom tribe is found scattered in 4 district out of the 9 districts of Manipur. The areas are Churanchandpur district, Chandel district, Senapati district, Imphal East district. The Kom tribe mostly occupied the foothills or slope of the hills. In the entire state, there are 44 villages of which 4 are situated in Chandel, 24 in Churanchandpur and 13 in Senapati and 3 in Imphal east district respectively. Some sample villages in each district was studied minutely to know and record the ethnobotanical knowledge (handloom weaving) with special reference to Kom tribe.

**Results**

The Kom especially the women traditionally make their own clothes. Living in remote areas they are dependent on traditional resources and have knowledge and skill in weaving. Loin and looms are available in every household. Weaving among women is a part of household duties. In addition to agricultural products they plant cotton for weaving cloths in their jhum fields. It is brought home and dried in the sun. The dried cotton seeds are cleaned in a wooden gin. The cotton gins made of Gmelina arborea Roxb. and gleaned rollers out of Quercus serrata Thunb. After separation from the seeds it is teased with Patsai- a bamboo bow (Dendrocalamus giganteus Munro) to make it soft and fluffy. The cotton is rolled and are ready for spinning. The spinning wheel (Ramhui) (Fig. 1) is made from Mesua ferra L. and cane, actual spindle is made from the Iron and the stem from Callicarpa arborea Roxb. Threads thus, obtained are originally dyed from plant sources, i.e. Mallotus philippensis Muell.- Arg., Mahonia manipurensis Takeda. The thread having been wound into ball is ready for weaving. For weaving, the loom used is a simple tension loom. A strong bamboo beam is tied between two house posts and from each end of this is suspended a loop of rope made of Pterygota alata (Roxb.) R.Br. of about 8 inches long. A wood (Mesua ferra L.) of about 36 inches long is hung through these two loops of rope to form bar of the loom. The weaver sits on the ground at a suitable distance from the bar of the loom according to the length of the cloth required. The weaver then passes behind her back a backstrap (Kongnanthruit) weaving Pumbeng (Fig. 2) made from hide of a cow. This belt is attached by cane & tied into the grooves at each end of a round stick-Taru (Tension rod), which is made of Bamboo. Other tools and equipments required for weaving are:

- **Tem** (Sword) is a flat piece of Mesua ferra L. placed between the warp threads to hold them in place to place the shuttles through (Fig. 3).

- **Serkhutim** with the help of Serkhutim (Porcupine quill) if weft become unven it can be loosened or placed in position (Fig. 4).

- **Shuttles** (Kothai) which is a piece of thin bamboo stick about 1 and ½ feet long with an opening on one end and a hole made in the middle (Fig. 5).

- **Tukdak** curved like teeth made from Mesua ferra L. of about 3ft in length.

- **Heddle** hold in place every alternate thread of the warp so that the Tem may be passed between tension rod.

- **Tako, Trai** are the split bamboo with two pointed ends placed parallel to Tem to keep already woven part even.

As the width achieved on the loin loom is narrow, two straps are woven separately and joined together to obtain the desired width. The main body of the cloth is patterned with geometric design. The design also consists of tiger, python pattern. Black shawl (Ponnthle) (Fig. 6) with red and yellow border embroideries became the style mark of the Kom tribe. A man with a respectable position in Kom society wears Paspan the cloth bearing the skin mark of python God. Kom people have a great belief in Pathen. The art of weaving to have been followed from Chongnu who fell in love with a python God (Pathen) still continues in lion looms. Before she formed in the realm of mortality she copied the marks of her lovers’ body in her loom. Variation of cultural and traditional important dresses are weaved by Kom women. Pasepun is Koms handwoven extraweft design sarong. Most of the design are denoting python marks, spears, animals used in extraweft design.
**Pumbeng** is the traditional lower garment having striped pattern over the body with the two parallel strips of geometric design. **Pumbang** is the traditional shawl used by the men. The lower borders are extended to a frill as décor.

**Discussion**

It is true that handloom weaving play a very important role in the social and economic life of the Kom tribe throughout the ages. Apart from agriculture, weaving provide highest employment to the Kom people. Although the Kom people have distinctive clothes of their own. They do not just create something individualistically as they weave but they have a cultural significance in their weaving. Every component of handloom is made of different plant resources. There are eight plant species which are used in weaving handloom (Table 1). There has been little change in the existing weaving tools as compared to earlier days. They still use bamboo, cane, wooden spools, etc. Originally, they used natural dye but nowadays they have switched over to synthetic dye available in the market. Though men do not take part in weaving they use **Korcham** (**Dao**), roam in the dense forest to pick up and choose the supplest of cane, choicest of bamboo and hardness of wood to make lion loom tools for their women. The use of these vanishing eco-friendly and indigenous

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**Table 1—Plant species used by Kom tribe in weaving**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of species</th>
<th>Local name</th>
<th>Mode of uses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Callicarpa arborea</em> Roxb. (Verbenaceae)</td>
<td>Mondol</td>
<td>Piece of this wood is used in making spindle of spinning wheel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Dendrocalamus giganteus</em> Munro (Poaceae)</td>
<td>Unan</td>
<td>Used in making <em>Patsai</em>- a bamboo bow to tease the cotton to make it soft and fluffy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Mahonia manipuresis</em> Takeda (Berberidaceae)</td>
<td>Kwang</td>
<td>Used in making wooden gin for cleaning dried cotton seed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Mallotus philippensis</em> Muell.-Arg. (Euphorbiaceae)</td>
<td>U-napu</td>
<td>As a dyeing agents for thread.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Mesua ferra</em> L. (Clusiaceae)</td>
<td>Kherasai</td>
<td>Wheel of the spinning machine is made from this wood; also a piece of the wood hung between lopes of ropes acts as bar of the loom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Quercus serrata</em> Roxb. (Lauraceae)</td>
<td>Saso</td>
<td>As gleaned rollers to make thread from cotton.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Pterygota alata</em> (Roxb.) R.Br. (Sterculariaceae)</td>
<td>Paiya</td>
<td>Used as rope for binding bamboo beam in a weaving loom.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Fig. 1-6—Indigenous handloom weaving of the Kom tribe
household artifacts could be revived by innovative funding. Weaving on the lion loom is an extremely slow and highly time consuming process but its continuation in hilly areas has certainly got a significant place in building up their internal economy. With the exposure to the outside world and the assistance given by the weaving section of the government industries, a handful of persons have started using the fly shuttle loom that gave a great boost to the economy of the self employed persons of the Kom tribe.

Traditional significance of the study and some constructive recommendations

The study has been taken up on a priority basis keeping in mind the vanishing traditional knowledge of the tribal with special reference to Kom tribe. Such study will be helpful in creating awareness among the tribal. The handloom products are mainly confined to the local markets due to the fact that most of these are cultural-specific items suitable for local use only. Besides purchase by local consumers, a part of the products reaching local market are also bought by traders and middlemen who resell the products in other markets. Since, the weavers have no marketing organization of their own, they are often forced to sell their products in a buyers market. The profit margin thus is very low, but they cannot withhold sale since ready cash is needed to buy the raw material. It is high time for the local Government to ensure that adequate funding are provided to make more participatory approaches in developing small scale industries and thus provide job opportunities to the local people at large. Presently three Government organizations are involved in handloom production activities namely, Manipur development societies (MDS), Manipur handicraft development corporation (MHHDC) and Manipur handloom weavers cooperative societies (MSHWS). Strengthening the state level handloom items, organizing festive fairs, exhibition etc would facilitate in the promotion of marketing of handloom products. Traditional practiced used are mostly organic, eco-friendly, sustainable, viable and cost effective. But there is a need to explore the potential of the Government funding for making handloom of this community viable, verify, modify and scientifically validate of these practices for their wider used and application.

Conclusion

Handloom weaving is the most culturally and traditionally practiced industry in Manipur. Knowledge of traditional practices provides valuable inputs to make efficient use of these industries incorporating plant species for sustainable development. Though among the Kom weaving is one of the traditional sources of income and livelihood but younger generation are showing less interest in weaving to continue such an important practice. This is due to the impact of modernization. Effort should be made that the traditional and culturally important heritage of women that are at risk and eroding should not wither away due to the effect of modernization on their culture. The study has been taken up to conserve and preserve the traditional craft and cultures of the Kom tribe of Manipur at large.

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