Traditional handloom and handicrafts of Sikkim

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Received 8 January 2008; revised 16 August 2008

Sikkim is a state having very old and deep rooted handloom and handicraft traditions. Handloom weaving, thanka painting, wooden mask making, wood carving are typical of Sikkim. All these traditional handloom and handicrafts are described.

Keywords: Handlooms, Handicrafts, Lepcha, Bhutia, Nepalese, Sikkim

IPC Int. Cl.: D01, D01H13/30, D06C, D06F, D06P, B27, G10D

Handloom and handicrafts forms a valuable cultural trait of a society from the beginning of the civilization. The cultural pattern of a society is reflected through the quality crafts and craftsmanship of the people. The term handloom and handicrafts includes those products of a specific community which are produced manually with their indigenous technology. The handicrafts of a society often become the chief means of livelihood. It also fulfils their daily requirements and provides employment to the members of the households of the society. So handlooms and handicrafts play a magnificent role in the socio-economic development of a society. Sikkim, a small beautiful state of India is located in the eastern Himalayas with an area of 7,096 sq km. It is bounded by Nepal in the West, Bhutan in the East, Tibet in the North and West Bengal in the South. Lepcha, Bhutia & Nepalese are three ethnic communities which inhabit in Sikkim. At present the Nepalese comprise 70% of the population followed by 12% of Bhutias and about 10% of Lepchas. Nepalese and Bhutias are evenly distributed throughout the state but Lepchas are mostly confined to the northern belt of Sikkim. Lepchas are original inhabitants of Sikkim. They are basically worshipper of nature or animist. They prefer living in their own tranquil surrounding fully in tune and harmony with nature. Lepcha handloom, cane & bamboo product are famous for their artistic design. Bhutias are originally from the Tibet. They are good in weaving carpet, craftsmanship, intricate paintings of Buddhist thankas, etc. The Nepalese came to Sikkim after Bhutias. Nepalese are good in craftsmanship.

Methodology
Surveys were carried out since 2006 in all the districts of Sikkim, following standard method to get the information of the handloom and handicrafts product of Sikkim. Personal interviews with the village head, group discussion and assistance of local informants were used.

Results
After one year of investigation, it was found that handloom and carpet weaving, thanka painting, wooden mask making, wood carving, bamboo and cane craft are indigenous product of Sikkim.

Handloom weaving
The handloom tradition in Sikkim is very old and Lepchas women play a predominant role in handloom weaving, they begin to learn the art from a very young age and gain exceptional craftsmanship in weaving intricately colorful fabrics from cotton yarn (Fig. 1). For weaving, first of all, the cotton yarn is sent for winding in wooden frames according to the specified length and breadth requirement. The wound cotton yarn is then fitted in the vertical frame loom and weaving begins. The handloom products range from plain to intricate patterns. The mostly used colures are
white, red, black, yellow and green. From the woven fabric variety of items, such as Lepcha traditional dresses, shoulder bags cushion cover, napkins and table mats, etc. are made (Fig. 2).

Carpet weaving
The carpet weaving is done by Bhutia women. For carpet weaving, first of all the taan is made from cotton yarn according to the sizes (Fig. 3). Then the weaving process begins according to the design, which is drawn on graph paper. While the weaving process goes on wooden hammers called flag are used to beat the woven wool into place. After the weaving is over, leveling is done with a leveling scissor to make the carpet thinner. Finally, the scissoring is done and the carpets are ready, which are used for covering sofas, beds, walls, chairs, etc.

Blanket weaving
The blanket weaving is done by Nepalese women. The blankets are normally woven with sheep wool. For weaving, first of all, raw wool is washed with soap to remove all dirt and is sun-dried; raw wool is brushed with carder brush for 2-3 days. The next process is spinning the yarn out of raw wool, which takes quite some time. A wooden instrument called, the phang is required to hold the yarn, which is done manually by hands. After the spinning process is over, the yarn is given colour. Chemical dyes or natural dyes like walnut bark, majito, shungey, etc. are used to produce different colour. Finally, in the weaving process, yarn of different shades is used and the taan or the main support for the weave is inserted to the iron steel reeds on the loom. The dyed woolen yarn is then ready to be woven into the blankets according to design.

Thanka painting
The thankas are the religious scrolls found hung in monasteries and houses of Buddhists. These are basically life sketches of Lord Buddha, Goddess Doma (Tara), or Guru Padmasambhava. A thanka serves as an ostensible symbol of the deity worshipped by the devotee, and it provides focal points for meditation. The thankas are painted by religious artisans known as Lharips. For thanka painting, first of all a rough piece of cotton is stretched on a frame and it is made smooth by sizing it with a mixture of chalk and glue. After it is dried and polished, painting is drawn on this cloth. Stone colour, vegetable dyes and two primary colours such as red and yellow are used in plenty while making a thanka painting (Fig. 4). These two primary colures show the difference between fire and life, between material and immaterial. The orange symbolizes knowledge of the highest form of spirituality, the blue colour suggests depth, purity and infinity, while green represent the vegetable aspects.

Wood carving
Wood carving is an ancient art form of both the Lepchas and the Bhutias of Sikkim. The main raw material used in this craft is wood. The wood of Cedrela toona Roxb., (tooni), Juglans regia Linn. (okhar), and Michelia champaca Linn. (chap) are normally used for wood carving (Fig. 5). For wood carving, a piece of wood is cut into the desired shape at first. After seasoning process, very fine chisels and tools are used to curve out the designs. The carved pieces are then assembled together and get ready for a coat or paint. Chokse (folding table), bagschok (centre table), table lamp, sofa seats, screen partition etc. are major wood carved products of Sikkim (Fig. 6).

Wooden mask making
Mask making is another ancient craft in Sikkim. Wooden masks may depict serene, partly angry or anomaly expression (Fig. 7). The masks are carved out of the tough light wood of Abies spectabilis (D.Don) Mirb. Prior to carving, the wood has to be seasoned. The wood piece is cut horizontally according to the size of the masks to be made. Thereafter, curved knife is used to bring to shape the concave and convex portions. The surface of the mask is smoothened by using sand paper, synthetic painting follows thereafter. Lucky sign are also made out of wood (Fig. 8).

Bamboo and cane craft
Bamboo and cane craft are deep rooted in traditional culture of all three ethnic group of Sikkim. Various attractive ecofriendly products are made out of bamboo and cane, such as Lepcha hats, fruit and vegetable baskets, mugs, flower vases, tea trays, carry bags, containers, baskets, dustbins, mats, etc.

Conclusion
Sikkim is one of the favorite tourist destinations in India. The traditional handloom and handicrafts products of Sikkim are very popular among the tourist. But despite improvement in technology elsewhere, no noticeable change has been recorded in Sikkim. The practices of using old age tools like wooden hammer, scissors, knife, etc. should be
replaced by modern tools. Research and design development unit need to establish in each district of state for generating sustainable livelihood both in urban and rural areas.

Acknowledgement
Authors are thankful to Mr Sonam Lepcha and Mr Tenzing Bhutia of Mangan and also to the Mrs Namrata Thapa, Director, Mr KS Bhutia, Assistant Director and all other staff of Handicrafts and Handloom Department, Government of Sikkim, for providing necessary information.

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