



"Handloom Weaving in Nagaland"

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Abstract

Handloom weaving with natural dyes and colours has been an age old process, but contemporizing these products for present market is still up coming. The art of hand weaving is very popular in India and particularly in Nagaland, amongst the Naga women especially in the rural areas. The Nagas are best known for their shawls in which three or more pieces are woven separately and then stitched together.

Keywords: Clothing, Fabric, Textile, Woven Fabric.

Introduction

Nagaland is the 16th state of the Indian Union, and it was established on December 1, 1963. Nagas, the people of Nagaland, are the head-hunting tribes living in thousands of villages, many of which are buried in the deep jungles of Indo-Burma, speaking more than fifty languages and dialects, formerly notorious for head-hunting and human sacrifice, which is almost the only thing most people know about them (Alemchiba M., 1968). Each of the 16 odd tribes and sub-tribes that dwell in this exotic hill State can easily be distinguished by the colourful and intricately designed costumes, jewellery and beads that they adorn.

Tucked away in the north-eastern corner of India bordering Burma, the tiny Indian state of Nagaland with its large population of Baptists is geographically as well as culturally quite at a distance from the metropolises and fertile plains of India. Outside of its major cities -

Kohima, Dimapur and Mokukchung, Nagaland is still a land of hilltop villages

where some of the Naga tribes practise a rudimentary form of democracy, celebrate colourful festivals, often cultivate their lands using unsustainable slash and burn agriculture, though by most accounts, the traditional practice of headhunting has all but stopped (Bhattacharjee J.B., 1989).

Spinning and weaving have been two major industries in the Naga Hills. The Ao, Rengma and Lotha used to grow cotton sufficient not only for their own requirements but also for trading amongst the Naga tribes and the plainsmen. In recent years however, mill-made yarn, which is cheap and easily available, is steadily replacing the thread spun locally. Indigenous spinning has gradually become extinct. Weaving however continues to be popular.

Among the Nagas all women are expected to know weaving and they normally produce all the cloth necessary for the family.

Dress: A wrap, suspended from a shoulder is worn as a typical shirt by a



Naga man. A woman's skirt is a sheet of cloth, rolled at the waist which loops down to cover the legs. A bodice covers the breast. An apron is worn by fastening the edges of the cloth on both the sides of the collar bones or one end is fastened along one side and the other is suspended below an armpit. They use their shawl merely as a wrap around on their body (Sengupta S.,1994).

Naga tribes

According to the census report (2001), there are 46 Naga tribes out of which 16 are considered to be the major recognized ones, four non-Naga tribes and the rest sub-tribes inhabiting the state. The major tribes of the state includes Ao, Angami, Sema, Lotha, Chakhesang, Rengma, Konyaks, Phom, Yimchunger, Khiamnugan, Sangtam, Chang, Kuki, Pochury, Tangkhul and Zeliang.

Agriculture

The Nagas cultivate their land in the most primitive fashion by what is known as jhum system of cultivation. Under the jhum system the jungle is cut down during the last three months of the year and permitted to dry until ready to be burned down (Ghosh, 1992).

Fibre used for preparation of cloth

Traditionally only two fibres are used for weaving cloth in Nagaland, cotton and wool. Cotton is not much grown in Nagaland area. Whatever little is grown is neither enough nor good quality. Nagas purchase major part of the fibre either through the cooperatives or from the local shops. A large amount of the fibre comes from neighboring states too.

Those who produce cotton in their fields have to pass through different stages to make suitable yarn for weaving. Wool yarns are completely obtained from the neighbouring states or bought through cooperatives. In the past few years,

viscose rayon has replaced the use of wool since it is cheap and easily available. Moreover viscose is lustrous and it exhibits bright and vivid motifs than wool.

Technique of spinning

Spinning, like dyeing and weaving is performed by women and every Naga woman is supposed to weave the cloths of her family. The usual process of spinning is rather primitive and a few simple tools are used in the whole process. The cotton is cleaned off its seeds by being rolled on a flat stone with a short stick used like a rolling-pin. Some Nagas gin the cotton by a cottongin consisting of two wooden rollers geared to revolve in opposite directions and turned by a crank with the right hand. After ginning, the cotton is arded, then rolled by hand with the help of a round stick and then spun into thread. The Naga spindle is a primitive affair. It consists of a pin of bamboo stick about 22cms long.

To spin, a woman sits with her skirt pulled up to the top of her thigh and tucked between her legs. She then wets the tip of the spindle with her tongue and places the lower end of the spindle in a broken piece of earthen pot or in a small basket covered with a piece of rag and spins it clock-wise with a rotating motion with her right hand against her right thigh. When about a yard has been spun, it is unwound from the top of the spindle and rewound just above the stone whorl.

For starching the yarn, the skeins are first damped with cold water and pounded vigorously on a wooden board, with a rice pounder or a bamboo with the root portion cut level and next it is soaked in hot rice water for about ten to twenty minutes. Once dried, it is wound into balls for weaving (Singh K.S., 1994).



Dyeing

The Nagas use dark blue, red and rarely yellow dye. The blue used by the Nagas varies from light blue to about black according to the strength of the dye used. Blue dye is obtained from the leaves of the *strobilanthes flaccidifolius*. This is a universal Naga dye and the plant is grown in the gardens on the outskirts of the villages or in patches cleared in heavy jungle. The leaves grown in the shade produce a colour approaching black while those grown in the open sun produce a lighter blue colour and both are used in different stages of the dyeing process (Ghosh S., 2000).

Dyeing of cloth or thread is exclusively performed by women, and during this period, they must refrain from sexual intercourse and must not eat flesh. Different tribes of the Nagas have slightly different methods of making the different dyes. Dyeing is done, once the yarn is transferred into skeins. The indigenous colours are, in recent years fading away and are replaced by chemical dyes. Further the easy availability of coloured thread in the market does not encourage the necessity of producing the old indigenous colours (Hutton, 1969).

Technique of weaving

Unlike other parts of India, spinning and weaving in Nagaland is the exclusive monopoly of women. Naga loom, though of the type known as Indonesian tension loom, but is interesting to see working in detail. The loom is a simple back strap loom, with continuous horizontal warp consisting of six sticks serving the function of warp beam, lease rod, held stick, beating sword and extra warp beam. For setting the loom, first the warp beam is securely fastened to the wall of the house in a horizontal position,

at a height of nearly 70cms from the ground. On this are slipped two loops of bark string, which are equal to a little more than the length of the cloth to be woven. The cloth beam is notched at either ends, so as to attach the weaving belt, at the back of the weaver. By this she gets a firm support to keep the necessary tension.

Naga textiles and its symbolism

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. 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. Chakhesang shawls are very similar to the Angami tribe shawls, as Chakhesangs are actually the Eastern Angamis. "*Khonoma Shawl*", the most common warrior shawl of the Chakhesang tribe. The shawl has spear motif which signifies bravery in the 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.



Also there is woven a motif similar to piece of flesh (Alemchiba M.,1968).

Types of looms used

Two types of looms are prevalent in Nagaland. The loin loom or pit loom and the fly shuttle loom. Most of the women in villages possess loin loom and the weaving is done on these looms.

Painting on cloth

Paintings on a few clothes are practiced mostly by the Lothas, Aos and Rengmas. The Ao art of painting resembles that of the Rengmas, though the conventional pattern is different. Aos paint the white band of their famous warrior shawl, which can be worn only by one who had taken heads in war or who has performed feasts of merit. The figure of elephant, tiger, mithun, cock, dao spear and human heads are painted with black on the white median band. Sometimes, the ash of bamboo leaves is used in place of Tangko leaves resulting into a grey fluid, which is applied with a pointed end of the bamboo stick.

Painting is done by old men only. The color is prepared from the sap of a tree, which is mixed with very strong rice beer and the ash of its own leaves. He works free hand on the lines of the thread. The same medium is used by the Rengmas.

Embroidery of Nagaland

The beautiful embroidery of Nagaland portrays the rich artistic caliber of the local craftsmen of the north eastern state of India. The local indigenous population of Nagaland design unique patterns on their shawls, clothes and other decorative items made up of cloth which reflects their cultural heritage. The splendid embroidery of the Angami naga shawls of Nagaland has an internationally acclaimed status. Most of

the tourists who visit the north eastern state prefer to buy the beautiful shawls as relic of the rich artistic creativity of the native population of Nagaland. Designed with colorful threads or wools, the Angami Naga shawls reflect the old glory and grandeur of the state of Nagaland.

Popularly known as Sami Lami Phee, the Angami Naga shawls were gifted to the valiant fighters by the ruler of Nagaland in recognition of their service during the ancient times. The Angami Naga shawls are usually embroidered with unique design patterns of several wild animals against the black base of the shawls. The extra-ordinary flora and fauna of this beautiful state has inspired a number of textile motifs used in naga textiles. The motifs include animals, birds and some of the geometrical and religious motifs. Even after possessing such rich handloom sector, it is sad to know that the same is deteriorating by each passing day and the sector is still under developed. The local weavers involved are facing a number of problems like expensive fibers, unavailability of yarns, highly priced end product to name a few. Thus there is a need to preserve the traditional art of weaving of Nagaland along with improving the socio economic status of the weavers. We all know that handloom products are unique and each piece is different from each other. Hence for the upliftment of the status of weavers and the handloom industry of the state, required steps has to be taken. It is necessary to involve the youth of nation to come forward and give their contribution for the same cause.

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