

Continuity and Change in the Traditional Weaving Method: A Study of Women Weavers of Mima Village

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Abstract

The traditional hand weaving method has been an integral aspect of the culture of the Angami Nagas. It is a pride and an asset for the women folk to have knowledge of the art of weaving. It is an art form where women enjoy the space to express their creative skills through the beautiful designs and patterns that adorned the cloth. It also serves as a symbol of our rich cultural heritage which is displayed through the artistry of the weavers. The traditional method of yarn preparation, and the production process demands meticulous and enormous attention to it. With the progress of time, technology has revolutionized the weaving industry with good quality textiles, the availability of a variety of colours, which has improved and accelerated the production process. However, the significance and demand of the handwoven cloth has not lost its importance in the society. This demand has encouraged women in rural areas to continue to adopt the traditional weaving process. Weaving has proved to be a sustainable activity and a means of livelihood in rural areas. This article aims to shed light on how women weavers in rural areas still preserve the age-old tradition. It would also provide an in-depth understanding on the impact of weaving towards women empowerment.

Keywords: Handloom, Sustainable, Artistry, Heritage, Technology.

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Introduction:

Mima village is nestled at the foothill of Mount Japfii in the Southern Angami area of Kohima district, Nagaland. This village is popularly known for the practice of underground bee keeping method and is, therefore, called as the “Honey Village”. Weaving is another prospect that is emerging as an area of interest among the elders and the youth. According to a folktale of the birth of the first generation of the people of Mima, it is said that the first male child was conceived while the mother was weaving. As such weaving had a significant place in the life of the people. The practice and knowledge of weaving has been passed on from one generation to the next and it served as a way of preserving one’s culture and identity. The woven cloth embodies diverse meanings that is attached to the cultural beliefs and ideals of the society. One of the most basic needs of humans was clothing. In a tribal village such as Mima which has been separated from the other parts of civilization, the practice of weaving has been fulfilling one of the most basic needs of humans which is clothing. Weaving is an activity that is solely performed by womenfolk in Angami culture. This role may have been entrusted upon women due to the societal beliefs and norms where women have been attributed with the characteristics of a nurturing and caring entity who cater to the needs of the members of the family. From childhood women were taught to serve and look after the needs of their family members. As such women are taught how to weave at a very young age to get trained and acquainted with the strokes and designs. In olden times, when the market of western clothes was not easily accessible in rural areas, women take upon themselves the responsibility of providing woven clothes to meet the needs of their family members. The use of handwoven cloth is a tradition and a way of life that reflects the rich culture of the people of the Angamis. Women take pride in the fact that they are capable of providing woven clothes to their family members and extended relatives.

Weaving is generally defined as the process of making fabric through crossing threads horizontally and vertically using a loom. Beautiful woven motifs, traditional production process, and philosophical meanings in each woven cloth have become distinguishing features sought by buyers, who use them for fashion collections and investments. The process of weaving demands enormous time investment and skills as it goes through

different stages of preparation of thread, warping, designing and stitching. Each of these stages needs to be carefully tackled and completed to get good end results. The process of weaving has undergone a significant change and development with the introduction of simple tools to aid the production. However, there is still a great impact of the traditional method in weaving. The women weavers of Mima village still produces woven cloth using the traditional method.

Method of Weaving

In olden days, due to the non-availability of modern industrial produced yarns, weavers had to spun cotton and prepare the thread using the traditional wooden and bamboo tools. Cotton crops are grown locally for personal use. In preparing the thread, cotton is picked and collected and it is slowly and carefully rolled into a single thread using a small wooden stick to wrap it. It generally takes 5 days minimum for a weaver to accomplish the thread preparation. The duration of preparing the cotton into a thread depends on the time spent by the weaver.



Fig. 1- Traditional method of spinning thread on a smooth stick to be used for interlacing

When the thread is ready to use, it is warped between two sticks that are placed at a desirable distance from one end to the other in a vertical pattern until the desired size is achieved. The back strap loom is the method used to weave the cloth. This method of weaving uses sticks, rope, and a strap that is tied around the waist of the weaver which enables the weavers to control the tension on the warp by leaning backward or forward. In this method, the weavers can also move and carry the loom to any space allowing them to work both indoor and outdoor. Designs and patterns can be incorporated into the fabric as it is woven. The traditional shawls and mekhela generally consist of four sides which are woven separately. It is then stitched together manually at the same length followed by the tying of the unwoven threads at the rear ends which adds to the beauty of the cloth.

Nowadays, the spinning of thread is done more effectively and at a faster pace with the use of a simple to machines. There is also the innovative introduction of a loom that does not require the strap to be tied around the waist of the weaver but is tied to the loom itself. This is stated to give relief to the weavers unlike in the backstrap loom method. A 72 years old woman who is actively weaving expressed that this new loom is enabling her to weave continuously. It is noted that the industrial produced yarns are easier to work with and more durable enabling the weavers to accelerate the weaving process.



Fig. 2(a) The traditional method of weaving using back strap loom



Fig. 2(b) The traditional method of weaving using back strap loom



Fig. 3: A 72 years old woman using the new loom for weaving

Taboo

Weaving is not just an activity rather it is a sacred and very significant art for women. It is forbidden for a woman to feed a child while sitting on the weavers seat. Men folk are not allowed to seat or step across the weaving seat. It is believed that men would not fare well in sports or other athletic activities if they violate these taboos. The leftovers of food eaten by woman while seating in the weaving seat is not allowed to be consumed by the menfolk. Therefore, women take great care in avoiding such incidents.

The Impact of Industrially Produced Yarn on Weaving

In recent times, the weavers have the alternative to choose the type of yarn to be used based on their preferences due to the availability of industrial produced yarn. The most commonly used types of thread are polyester, thylane, two ply and four ply. There is a higher demand for the products made of polyester as it is considered to have better results. The pricing of the product depends on the quality, fabric used, and the complexity of the designs and patterns on the cloth. There is a huge selection of colours to be chosen to enhance the aesthetic aspect of the cloth. The shift from manually prepared yarn to the factory produced yarn has also changed and affected the production pace of woven clothes. The duration for the preparation is thread is minimal since weavers have the opportunity to get access to the industrial textiles. The time invested for preparation of yarn is minimized enabling the weavers to complete the production at a faster pace. The weavers of Mima village continues to adopt the traditional method as it is considered to produce the best quality with smooth weft and fetches a higher price than the factory produced clothes. It is mentioned that a suit of shawl and mekhela can be woven within 10-13 days. However, the pace of production of a cloth can be affected and manipulated for those weavers who have other social obligations particularly those within their household.

Weaving as a Source of Livelihood

Weaving is emerging as an activity that provides entrepreneurial opportunities for women in rural areas. It is also generating employment in rural sectors. Women not only enjoy the space of freedom to express their artistry in weaving but, they also view it as an opportunity for them to earn and contribute to the household economy. Although hand

woven clothes are not worn on a daily basis in modern times, the demand of these products continues to rise. In contrast to the olden times, weavers now earn and derive steady income by selling and marketing their hand woven clothes. Thus, it has also become a sustainable activity particularly in the rural areas such as Mima village. Weaving has become the professional career for about 20 women weavers of Mima Village. The weavers of Mima Village have been supplying handwoven cloth to the neighbouring villages all throughout the year without having commitments in other income generating activities. Young women who have secured good education have shown interest in taking up weaving as a source of earning as the demand is increasing. The age of women weavers ranges from 20-72 years. The young weavers who are more energetic can weave the cloth within short durations of time thereby enabling them to earn better. The age-old tradition and practice is enabling the weavers to utilise their skills to earn a living. It is stated that women not only produce the goods but they also enjoy the authority in the management of their business by marketing, negotiating and pricing of the goods. The income generated through weaving is relatively impacted by the amount of time invested to finish the product. The prices of products vary based on the size and the type of shawls.

Price Variation of Male Shawls:

Sl. No	Type of Shawl	Type of Wool	Price
1.	<i>Lopa</i>	Polyester	8000
2.	<i>Lopa</i>	Thylane	6000
3.	<i>Lopa</i>	Two-ply	4500
4.	<i>Lohe</i>	Polyester	6000
5.	<i>Lohe</i>	Thylane	5000
6.	<i>Lohe</i>	Two-ply	4500
7.	<i>Phfese</i>	Polyester	17000

Price Variation of Female Shawls and Mekhela:

Sl.No.	Type of Shawl	Type of Wool	Prices
1.	<i>Lopa</i>	Polyester	8000
2.	<i>Lopa</i>	Thylane	6000

3.	<i>Lopa</i>	Two-ply	4500
4.	<i>Lohe</i>	Polyester	5000
5.	<i>Lohe</i>	Thylane	4000
6.	<i>Lohe</i>	Two-ply	3500

Sl. No	Type of Shawl	Type of Wool	Price
1.	<i>Phfemhou</i> suit	Polyester	14000
2.	<i>Phfemhou</i> suit	Thylane	12000
3.	<i>Phfemhou</i> suit	Two-ply	11000
4.	<i>Lohe</i> suit	Polyester	9500
5.	<i>Lohe</i> suit	Thylane	8500
6.	<i>Lohe</i> suit	Two-ply	7500

The prices mentioned on the table represents the selling price in retail. The wholesale price may vary depending on the negotiations made between the weaver and the dealer. Besides the mentioned articles and types of shawls and mekhelas, there are various items which are produced through the process of weaving. For example: *Teha*, *Bipra*, *Biso*, *Chiepha*, etc are some traditional attires which are not large in size but involves a lot of skills to weave. A weaver can earn around INR 30000/- monthly. This suggests that weavers have the opportunity to earn a steady income and become financially independent.

Conclusion:

Women have been showing increased interest in the use of hand woven products such as the traditional shawls and mekhela. The demand of these products is immensely facilitated by the promotion of our culture and tradition. This study suggests that the weaving industry is benefitting the local economy by reducing the poverty rate and raising the standards of living in rural areas. As such, the weaving industry needs to be developed and supported with the provision of financial loans/assistance for weavers to purchase their materials. It is observed that the product quality, designing, colours have a positive impact on the purchase of handwoven cloth. Training on skills and creative designs can also help to expand the market and demand of hand woven cloth among the young consumers. In

this regard, the government can create schemes that is aimed at helping and providing training on the vocational skills that can improve the economy.

Since the weaving process involves a lot of concentration and good health, many women have expressed that their income is affected at times when they are unable to work due to health complications. Another factor that hampers the ability of the weavers is the obligation that arises within their household. Women have always been assigned the household chores such as cooking, carrying water, cleaning, washing, etc. Therefore, it can be understood that the productive ability is largely affected for those weavers who have children of their own. These issues and problems can be checked with the efforts of the government or the NGO's by arranging collective marketing and trading activities that would enable the weavers to get incentives over a period of time. This would also enable the weavers to maintain a production plan, generate and distribute orders. The huge variation in prices between the machine woven cloth and the handloom also threatens the traditional weaving entrepreneurs as they are not able to compete with the pace of production. As such, the government can take the role of creating and setting up markets for traditional weavers which can promote the products through exhibitions, and connect the local weavers with international buyers.

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