

Handicrafts and Handloom Products of Nagaland : Their Problems and Prospects

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Handloom and Handicrafts

Handloom and Handicrafts play a vital role in rural economy of Naga society. All Naga tribes are expert both in handloom weaving and handicraft manufacturing. They had been practising it since time immemorial. The man's styles are solely expressed in the art of wood, bamboo, stones and so on, whereas the woman's styles find their expression in weaving, embroidery and pottery etc.

Handloom

In every Naga household there is at least one loom. Every Naga adult woman can weave for herself and domestic consumption. The parents act as the mastercraftsmen in the family. It is their duty to make their children learn their respective work, i.e., weaving and embroidery works by young girls, and bamboo, cane and stone works etc. by young men. It would be generally a shame for them if they do not know their respective works. Of course, traditional works of both the sexes are now disappearing slowly due to modernization. However, traditional method of weaving is still practised throughout the State by different tribes.

Each tribe wears particular shawls and skirts having at least a dozen of different colourful designs. They are directly related with the socio-cultural aspects of life signifying different occasions. Shawls and skirts give different meanings of uses and social background. For instance, "Loho" is an

Angami shawl which can be worn by both the sexes of common people. "Tsongkotepsi" is an Ao warrior shawl for male only; "Nyauni" is a konyak warrior shawl worn by male only; "Tobu Noi" is exclusively a Chang warrior shawl etc. Thus, certain Naga shawls and skirts are exclusively for either male or female, richman, warrior or a particular clan only.

Till the fifties and sixties, Naga shawls, skirts and other handicraft products were unknown in our country and in the world market. But today, it has been experienced that people of different countries are attracted by decorated items of Naga handicraft and colourful shawls.

Handicrafts

Men are expert in handicrafts, as women are in weaving. The bachelors' Dormitory or Morung ("Arju" in Ao Naga) is the oldest institution for learning of handicrafts. Young men are trained not only as warriors but as master craftsmen. The art of wood and bamboo carving is taught there, which is associated primarily with "head-hunting" practices. The Morung itself is a handicraft which includes different styles of wood and bamboo carving and most beautiful paintings. The "Log Drum" (Sungkong" in Ao Naga), is also a big handicraft which has different organs from head to tail, well-carved, and painted. Thus among the rural Naga Societies the Morung and the "Log Drum" can be considered as the two biggest handicrafts which we can find even today in many villages.

Head-hunting is no longer practised now, but that forms the basis of the cultural and religious life of the Naga people and the philosophy of the art of painting and carving of wood and bamboo; even shawls are associated with head-hunting.

The major commercial items of handicrafts include : decorated spears, wooden human figures, wooden dishes, wooden spoons, decorated daos, red hats, bamboo-made cups, etc.

Different tribes have different tastes and specialization in different items of handicraft and handloom weaving as indicated below in which they express their static impulses in symbolic actions.

Name of Tribe	Cultural Hq.	Specialization
Angami	Kohima	Basketry, weaving etc.
Ao	Mokokchung	Cane and bamboo works, weaving
Chakesang	Phék	Blacksmithy, weaving, basketry, etc.
Chang	Tuensang	Weaving, gun making etc.
Konyak	Mon	Wood carving, gun manufacturing
Khamngan	Tuensang/Noklak	Stone wares, blacksmithy, wood and Bamboo works etc.
Kuki	—	Weaving, bamboo works etc.
Phom	Tuensang/Longling	Wood and bamboo works, weaving etc.
Sangtam	Tuensang	Weaving, gun making bamboo works etc.
Sema	Zunhebote	Weaving, bamboo and stone works.
Rengma	Tsemnyu	Weaving, bamboo works etc.
Yimchunger	Tuensang/Kiphère	Weaving, wood and bamboo works
Zeliang	Peren	cane works, weaving etc.

Prospects and Problems

(i) Raw materials

Almost the whole State comprises of hilly terrains, and 'Nagaland is a lovely thick forest with beautiful green hills'. Therefore there are plenty of raw materials for the different crafts. Champ, Holak and some other timber are commonly used for wood works. They are soft but do not break easily. The *Dendroclamus Hameltoni*, the *Bambusa* bamboo which are used for bamboo carving, basketry etc. are also plentiful. Different types of cane are also available, but they have to be

collected from thick jungles which requires more man days and more man power. Moreover, they have to be shaped into a particular design without modern tools and implements. The process of wood and bamboo works as well as loom weaving is a very slow and time-taking job. As such, the costs of finished products are very high.

Till 1950s Nagas were rich cotton growers. But as cotton became readily available from Ludhiana, Madras, Bombay, Calcutta, Gauhati etc. they stopped growing cotton.

(ii) Demand

Though the costs are high, Naga handicrafts and loom products are highly demanded both at home and abroad. Decorated long daos, spears, red hats, wooden human statues and colourful shawls and skirts etc. have special appeal to western tastes. By and large, shawls and skirts are produced by all tribes of Nagaland. However, long decorated daos, spears, red hats etc. are mostly manufactured in Tuensang district. The Khamngans, the Changs, the Yimchungers of Tuensang district are more adept than other tribes in making these valuable items. The price of a long decorated spear and dao are Rs. 130/- and Rs. 120/- respectively in the market. People from outside often pay Rs. 200/- and Rs. 150/- respectively. The armed personnel and other visitors pay even Rs. 500/- each for one decorated spear and long dao for their drawing room decoration. These items hardly reach the district H.Q. Emporia as they are readily sold through personal contact. Unluckily, Naga societies today are not economically oriented. Moreover, the upliftment of rural people and development of rural and marketing institutions have been neglected till today.

The Problems

Although, a number of attractive designs of handloom products and handicrafts are found, their costs are high due to the fact that loom weaving is a highly labour-intensive work. Due to lack of marketing facilities every household produces mainly for domestic consumption. If there would

have been enough marketing facilities every Naga woman could have supplied different woven designs of better quality at cheaper rates to different markets in the region.

Even though wood and bamboo work is very popular, it is generally a subsidiary occupation. Though they are expert in bamboo and wood works, they do not practise it as their main profession as the opportunity cost is high. This is because daily wages in rural areas have gone up ranging from Rs. 15/- to Rs. 20/- for women and from Rs. 20/- to Rs. 35/- for men respectively. As such, the artisans take less interest either in weaving or in handicrafts.

Training of artisans and their self-employment are the two major problems. For instance, 25 persons were trained in Cane and Bamboo Training Centre at Dimapur under the sponsorship of All India Handicrafts Board through NEHHDC Ltd. Shillong. But after the training was over, not a single trainee could set up his own firm due to lack of incentives in the field. The State Govt. and the Board also could not provide any assistance to them after the training period was over. At present there are 38 female trainees who are receiving intensive training in Carpet Weaving Training Centre, Dimapur, which is sponsored by the same Board. But after the expiry of the training period they might be compelled to leave the institution as the Board did not intimate the Corporation either to retain or remove them in spite of repeated reminders. Cane and Bamboo Training Centre was closed down which was established in November 1980, just after releasing the first batch of trainees i.e. within eight months' time. The Carpet Weaving Training Centre is also caught in a dilemma now. While interviewing the trainees, it has been detected that most of them joined the training centre just to enjoy the scholarships before they get other suitable jobs. Even after the completion of the basic training course, they are not interested in establishing their own units, rather, they are more interested in getting a piece of contract work or a profitable job. Very often, it is found difficult to get an experienced mastercraftsman with technical knowledge. In the absence of these expert hands and due to political favouritism,

the Corporation employs even unqualified persons. As a result, those enthusiastic trainees are badly disappointed. (It was experienced during 1980-81, when Cane and Bamboo Training Programme was undertaken).

Another problem is found in organizational aspect. Except for a few executive officers who come mostly from Industries Department, Government of Nagaland, on deputation, most of the grade III and IV employees hold purely temporary posts. There is no job security especially amongst those 302 number of casual labourers. As a result, they do not take their normal duties seriously. The success and failure of the Corporation would highly depend on these temporary appointees. When their services, especially grade III and IV employees, are regularised, they may take more interest in their work and the Corporation may also assign greater responsibilities to them which would benefit the Corporation.

In conclusion, I would emphasize the need for the respective States/Boards/Corporations etc. to arrange marketing facilities in the North-Eastern region for those finished products of loom-weaving and handicraft goods. The North-Eastern Handicrafts and Handloom Development Corporation Ltd., Shillong should arrange an inter-state handicrafts and handloom products exhibition from time to time and thereby ensure inter-ethnic communication and cultural contact in days to come. It should conduct training programme and research projects for popularization of these products in the rural markets in the region. It should be examined as to what extent modern technological facilities might be extended to traditional workshop like handloom and handicrafts and allied sectors in the region. Raw materials of better quality at cheaper rate have to be made locally available. Higher percentage of subsidy has to be given for transport and the means of communication have to be developed.