



# Impact of Modernization on Handloom Weavers in the Naga Society: A Study of Dimapur District

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**Abstract:** Weaving forms an integral part of Naga way of life like most other craft among the tribals. In the past years, all Naga women were trained to weave for the entire Family. Weaving as a profession is not just a profession but it is also one of the significant features of the Nagas that holds the identity of the different Naga tribes in Nagaland. There are many features that make Naga Weaving unique one of which is the reflection of rich artistic skills and creative imagination of the local craftsmen who have inherited the art from the forefathers. However, with the coming of modern industries and the impact of modernization, it has left a huge impact on the traditional techniques of weaving. New symbols & patterns and the implementation of machines, new tools and techniques has led to the disintegration of the old techniques of weaving among the Naga society. Within such a backdrop, the present paper is an attempt to locate the impact of modernization on handloom weavers and backstrap weavers in Nagaland. The paper locates the changes in the weaving style, techniques, meaning and symbolism as well as the changes in the preferences of clothing of the populace. The researcher spent close to two months in Dimapur Town in the months of February and March, 2024, interacting and interviewing women weavers (both handloom and manual) for data collection.

**Key Words:** Handloom, industry, modernization, weavers, changes.

## 1. INTRODUCTION :

Handloom is the oldest known form of making cloth by hand. It represents a very early stage of cloth production. Handloom is now the source of livelihood to several millions of artisans and their families all over the world. Mishra and Mohapatra (2020) maintains that among the Third World Nations, a few countries still proudly keep on the ancient tradition of hand weaving side by side with power looms as the symbols of cultural legacies. Handloom products are not mere pieces of decorations but also symbolize the culture and civilization. That apart, it is the time-honoured legacy that has been passed on to us by our ancestor (p. 1923). The handloom sector of India is known all over the world for its uniqueness and intricate designs. Tradition of hand weaving has become a part of our country's cultural heritage that symbolizes the ability of the weavers to design intricate artistic and attractive products by use of handlooms. Handloom is unparalleled in its flexibility and versatility, permitting experimentation and encouraging innovations.

Since ancient times, handloom industry in India was an important form of cottage industry in which producers and merchants had a strong interdependence in so far as the supply of input and output was concerned (Singh, 2014: p. 173). Kumar (2015) argues that Handloom weaving is one of the largest economic activities after agriculture providing direct and indirect employment opportunities to more than 43lakh of weavers in India. He further maintains that the handloom sector occupies a distinct and unique place in the Indian economy, besides being the largest generator of non-farm rural employment. The handloom industry is largely household based, carried out with labour contributed by the entire family. It is dispersed, spread across thousands of villages and towns in the country (Kumar, 2015: 24). Mishra and Mohapatra (2020) also maintains that Indian Hand-woven fabrics have existed since beyond reach of memory. This sector involves a large number of artisans from rural and semi-urban areas, most of which are women and people from the economically disadvantaged group (p. 159)



## **2. PROFILE OF HANDLOOM INDUSTRY IN NAGALAND :**

History of origin of the Naga weaving is not found anywhere as there is no written history on this subject. But the Nagas became aware of the value of their handicrafts during and after the Second World War 1944-49. First of all, they made container / bags with red, green and black threads. The bags were woven by mixing up these colours without much design but they were woven beautifully which made them happy. They could weave 4 to 5 bags together at a time which were cut and stitched into separate bags. Two to three pieces of belt/ropes were also woven at a time which were later cut and fixed in the bags by stitching. These bags could be used freely and conveniently by both men and women. Viyie argues that Prior to those days Nagas weaved their own simple dresses with black, red, and green borders but sophisticated and beautiful designs were woven only during and after 1944-49. The Naga women continued to weave for their livelihood even after the war was over and handicrafts of the Naga men and women attracted not only like Army personnel (British) during and after the world war but also the people of the rest of the territory (Viyie, 2022: 6)

Ckj (2017) maintains that among many Naga Tribes it is believed that the origin of spinning and weaving is associated with supernatural being that has inspired them to invent the art of weaving (p. 34). Nagaland has a rich history of handloom and handicraft with each tribe having their distinct designs and patterns that help us to identify them. Chhabra (2013) argues that the handicrafts and handloom sector of Nagaland has vast potential for growth due to the availability of skilled labor and raw materials in abundance, as well as due to the rich cultural traditions of the local people. Most of the handicrafts and handloom industries are mainly managed by cooperative societies (p. 230)

The Nagaland Handloom & Handicrafts Development Corporation Ltd. was set up in the year 1979 as Government of Nagaland Undertaking with the main objective of promotion and development of vibrant traditional Handloom & Handicrafts products indigenous and unique to the state of Nagaland. The Corporation is having its Head office at Half Nagarjan, Dimapur, Nagaland and has 10 (ten) Sales Emporium within and outside the State. The Corporation is also having a production center at its Head Office Complex where it produces both Handloom & Handicrafts products to be sold through its emporium. The Corporation also distributes raw materials to the registered group of Artisans/Weavers to enhance production of fixed rate basis. Further, procurement of finished goods from the registered members are being carried out for sales through its own outlets i.e., Emporiums, organizing various Exhibitions, Fairs and Crafts Bazaars within and outside the state are actively being carried out to provide a platform to our artisans/weavers for promotion of their products and also to educate them about the intricacies of marketing world. The Corporation is also being implementing several other welfare activities being sponsored by the Govt. of India for the welfare of the artisans & weavers with a view to improve their socio-economic condition

## **3. IMPORTANCE OF WEAVING IN NAGA CULTURE :**

Weaving plays a major role in the identity formation of a culture among the Naga society. Weaving also holds a significant importance as a cherished tradition deeply rooted in the rich tapestry of a culture's past, intricately woven with threads of history, values and identity. Stating to this statement Hoshili, one of the respondents of the study commented that,

According to me, Weaving is considered as an important factor in a certain culture because weaving often plays a significant role in defining the cultural identity of our own community. All Naga communities have different pattern, styles and motifs depicted in each cloth that is weaved. Weaving doesn't only contribute towards economic activity but also contribute towards communal activity, bringing people together for shared labour and creativity where it strengthens social bonds within a community and provide a sense of belonging.<sup>1</sup>

Inali zhimomi also asserted that,

“Since olden days, weaving is considered as a part of ritual, religion & norms in the society and so in order not to lose this identity we should learn to carry on this practices into the on –going society in order to know one's own identity among the Naga society and in order to preserve our fore –father identity of weaving practices .If we learn to preserve and protect the art of weaving then even our Grandchildren will carry this art of weaving in the coming years and so by any means we should try to protect our cultural identity and practices in order not to lose its value in a certain culture.<sup>2</sup>”

## **4. IMPACT OF MODERNIZATION ON TRADITIONAL WEAVING TECHNIQUES :**

Among Naga weavers, the impact of modernization on traditional weaving techniques is significant. The Naga tribes, known for their rich weaving heritage have been adapting to modern influences where most of the Naga weavers

<sup>1</sup> Interview with Hoshili on date 02/03/24

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Inali zhimomi on date 21/03/24



incorporate modern designs and motifs into their traditional weaving. One of the respondents during the course of the interview asserted that,

“In recent years, womenfolk who are continuing the tradition of weaving weaves the cloth based on the demands and preferences of the market without following the traditional techniques and tools. In the past years, during the time of our fore –fathers, we implemented and used the traditional dye and designs. However, the significance of the motifs, designs used as well as the techniques have changed significantly. There is no uniformity in the weaving process. For instance, a Sumi *Mekhala*<sup>3</sup> which we called *Lotosuh* in sumi Dialect, in the olden days was weaved using black colored dye. However, the colour of the yarn is now replaced by blue. Change in the design and colours are not only seen in this *Mekhala* but even on other Traditional attires too.”<sup>4</sup>

Another respondent has also asserted that,

“Modernization has also led to a fusion of traditional weaving techniques where many non-local weavers like Manipuri or Kachari workers who work in Handloom industry try to experiment with new patterns, colours and design adding their own traditional motifs and colours leading to disintegration of the traditional Naga weaving style. Additionally, in recent years, the weavers try to gather to the demands of the customers who mostly try to adopt new styles and techniques whereby a blend of modernity and tradition has surfaced in the usage of weaved cloths. For example, modern dress and skirt is often stitched with a small traditional cloth and worn in several functions and occasions.”<sup>5</sup>

Watielna has also responded that,

“Yes, the impact of modernization has affected the style art of weaving. I started to weave when I was a teenager and it takes a full month to complete two complete pieces of cloth. However, with the coming of small scale as well as large industries, machinery has taken over the market. Hence, machineries make up to 50 pieces of cloth in a month. The number of cloths generated by machines are much more to the hand-woven cloths. However, this has compromised on the final product obtained.”<sup>6</sup>

It may be argued here that there is a big difference between the quality of the cloth which is made by the machine and the hand-woven ones. Based on their differentiation, one of the respondents asserted that,

“the machine made cloth may look beautiful but after one- two use the yarn resistibility becomes old and loose; it cannot be used for multiple times and it cannot be passed down but hand weaved cloth are often durable and can be used for multiple times and can be passed down from a mother to a child. Another distinction between the two is in terms of the length of the cloth. For the manually weaved cloth, one normally makes two 50m cloth and stitch them together. However, for the machine-made handloom, the weavers directly make a 100m cloth at one go and do not have to stitch two pieces of cloth together to make the final product. .”<sup>7</sup>

### ***Changes in the Art of Design and Weaving***

Changes in the art of design and weaving compared to the past are significant, reflecting advancement in technology, shift in cultural values and changes in market demands. Based on the change in the art of design and weaving many weavers gave statements relating to the issue in the change of art of design and motifs. One of the respondents maintained that,

“Yes I have noticed several changes based on the designs and colours sold in the market. The weavers no longer stick to the traditional designs which had specific motifs and symbolism differing across tribes. At present, everyone is inserting their own designs and the usage of colours are also not according to the olden days. This has resulted in the disintegration of the real meaning behind the motifs and designs used.”<sup>8</sup>

Another respondent Ikali zhimomi also expressed that

“The intricate design and colours which our fore- fathers have been using and practiced for generations and years, have already lost its identity in this present generation. For instance, our sumi *Mekhala* which we called as ‘*Ahuna –Amni*’ has seen a lot of change in the pattern and design of weaving. This is a *Mekhala* worn during the *Ahuna*<sup>9</sup> festival. Presently, at such festive gatherings we will see a sight of womenfolk wearing the *Ahuna Amni* of various variants.”<sup>10</sup>

<sup>3</sup> A waist wrap around cloth used by womenfolk among the Nagas

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Hoshili on date 02/03/24

<sup>6</sup> Interview with watielna on date 27/02/24

<sup>7</sup> Interview with k.lochumlololi on date 21/03/24

<sup>8</sup> Interview with kaheli on date 27/02/24

<sup>9</sup> Ahuna is a traditional post-harvest festival of the Sumi Nagas signifying the celebration of season’s harvest with thanksgiving

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Ikali zhimomi on date 22/03/24



It may be mentioned here that several respondents had argued about the changes that's noticed in the art of weaving, techniques as well as methods. Some of the important changes may be highlighted below.

1. *Plantation of natural yarn*: In the past, most weavers used cotton yarn which was grown naturally to weave the cloth. These plants were grown mostly at the backyard of the house. However, this practice of using organic materials for creating a piece of cloth is no longer in vogue. Earlier, the first step in weaving was fiber preparation where the cotton is harvested, cleaned and carded to align the fibers. Once this is done, the cleansed fibers are spun into yarn using a spinning wheel or a spindle. After the yarn is produced, they are dyed and dried using natural materials from plants, leaves, roots etc. However, at present commercial yarn which are easily available and convenient for the weavers to buy from the market directly are used. The commercial yarn comes in a variety of colours and textures, allowing room for more diverse and vibrant design.
2. *Incorporation of synthetic fibers*: Due to availability of multiple resources in the market, at present Naga weavers implement the use of synthetic fiber such as Nylon, polyester, Gopina & Thailand in their weaving.
3. *Adoption of power loom*: Even though Backstrap loom are still practiced by many Naga weavers, the adoption of power looms has seen a major shift in the handloom enterprise. Power looms allow production of cloth at considerably lesser amount of time. It also allows efficiency in manufacturing larger number of cloths making them more popular for commercial purposes.
4. *Innovation in design*: Many weavers have come up with many new design and motifs, blending traditional patterns with modern elements leading to innovation in new design and textiles among different weavers. This has resulted in creation of multiple variants for a particular cloth which lacks uniformity in the design, pattern and colour.

The influence of modernization on handloom weaving among Naga weavers has been deep and diverse, profoundly impacting traditional practices that have been passed down through generations. These age-old techniques are now encountering excess of new influences and challenges in the rapidly evolving modern world, highlighting a significant transition not merely centered around the adoption of new technologies. This shift also reflects broader changes resonating in the cultural, social, and economic fabric of Naga society, unraveling a tapestry where traditional craftsmanship is interwoven with contemporary complexities. One crucial facet of this modernization is observed in the transformation of weaving techniques and designs. The gradual integration of modern machinery and tools has steered a departure from the cherished traditional handloom weaving towards more mechanized methodologies. Consequently, this shift not only alters the production process of cloth but also impacts the quality and distinctiveness of the final creations.

## 5. SUMMARY :

The Naga Handloom and Handicraft has and still is given utmost priority by the tribals as it is a part of their cultural identity and is what makes them different from people of other states (Murumi, 2019: p.21). The traditional art of handloom weaving in Nagaland is a testament to the skill and artistry of the Naga artisans as they deftly craft intricate patterns and motifs that have been treasured and passed down through generations. These delicate techniques serve as a reflection of the rich cultural heritage that is enshrined in every woven fabric, telling stories of resilience, identity, and community spirit. However, in an era marked by rapid modernization and technological advancements, the handloom industry in Nagaland faces the hurdle of balancing tradition with innovation. Despite the challenges posed by mechanized competition and shifting consumer demands, initiatives are underway to rejuvenate this ancient craft by celebrating its traditional craftsmanship and promoting the unique allure of Naga textiles.

With the advent of modernization paving ways for diverse lucrative opportunities, the younger generation seems increasingly crestfallen with the idea of pursuing weaving as a livelihood. This shift in mindset has raised a distressing concern regarding the future sustainability of handloom weaving in Naga society. Hence, the imperative task of preserving this age-old craft stands critical amidst the various waves of social change. Handloom weaving stands not just as a craft but as a vital symbol deeply interwoven with the cultural identity and heritage of the Naga people. The gradual decline in traditional weaving practices looms as a threat, potentially chipping away at this rich cultural tapestry and alienating forthcoming generations from their rich heritage. Consequently, there are conscious efforts made by the Naga community to safeguard the legacy and traditions.

Various organizations and government bodies are extending support and training opportunities to young weavers, fostering an environment that encourages them to pick up the mantle and carry forward the tradition. Moreover, a renewed interest is burgeoning among consumers - both local and global - for authentic handloom products, instilling a ray of hope for the future prospects of handloom weaving in Naga society. In a comprehensive analysis, it is evident that the implications of modernization on handloom weaving practices within the Naga community encompass a



multifaceted and ongoing transformation. This current wave of modernity has introduced a plethora of transformations and difficulties, yet it has also opened up new avenues for reviving and safeguarding the rich heritage of this age-old art form.

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