

Sustaining Indigenous Textile Artisans and their Art in the North Eastern Region of India

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Introduction and Literature: The Indian handloom industry is one of the largest unorganized economic sectors in the country, providing many indigenous groups with a source of income (Government of India, 2015). In recent years, the handloom industry has seen exponential growth in domestic and international sales, with exports doubling from 2010 to 2015 (Government of India, 2015). The North Eastern Region of India (NERI), which encompasses only 8% of India's geographic area, accounts for 61% of the total handloom workforce (Devi, 2013). NERI has the highest concentration of handloom units in India, with 99% of textiles being produced within the homes of indigenous artisans (Devi, 2013). Although men dominate weaving across most parts of India, in NERI, women make up majority of the textile workforce (Devi, 2013), making them demographically unique in this sector.

Women in NERI consider weaving to be a culturally significant activity that provides employment and an additional source of income for the household. Weavers' households in NERI have reported a higher annual income by leveraging their cultural association and proximity of production activities to the home (Government of India, 2010). The industry is self-sustaining, where skills are transferred from one generation to the next, is less capital intensive, and eco-friendly (Government of India, 2015). Though increasing attention is being paid to these textile artisans by multiple stakeholders (government, designers, artisan welfare organizations etc.), an empirical understanding of the work and life of these indigenous artisans, and the forces sustaining their livelihood and art of textile production is lacking. Hence, the purpose of this exploratory study is to gain insight into the indigenous textile artisans of NERI and their art, unveiling the factors that have contributed to their sustenance. Traditional textile art in the context of this research refers to skilled activities such as rearing, spinning, dyeing and weaving of traditional silk products, including scarves and shawls.

Method: Using a qualitative, ethnographic approach to gain in-depth insight into the lives of the artisans and their art, the researchers observed and interviewed 10 female artisans belonging to the indigenous Nongthlu and Mikir tribes in the state of Meghalaya, located in the NERI. Participants were recruited based on their current engagement in the local handloom industry through the Department of Sericulture, and varied in their age and skill level in the traditional art of silk cultivation and production. The interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed verbatim. A representative of the Department of Sericulture who was well versed in English and the native language tribes helped conduct the interviews, actively translating throughout. Transcriptions were analyzed iteratively and in-depth to reveal themes correlating to the research questions. Field observation and journaling helped verify and validate the data extracted from the formal interviews.

Findings: Distinct themes emerged under the artisan and their art, and sustenance of the two.

The Artisan and their Art - Born with it: One of the beliefs consistent among the participants was that the skill of spinning, weaving, dyeing etc. was inherited since childhood and was inborn, revealing a natural inclination towards becoming an expert of the textile art from the get-go. KT said, "...I have an inborn skill and not everyone is born to weave or dye..."

Pride and Culture: Participants felt proud when others adorned their creations, as stated by TT that, "When someone wears the clothing which I wove and someone asks them where they get it and come to know that it's my creation, the pride is there." Moreover, this pride over the self as an artist, seemed to extend to pride over the culture at large. As PT stated, "I feel more pride about (weaving) because whenever I wear it's like showcasing to others about my culture."

Passion meets Profession: Artisans' passion for the art was evident, with most of them explicitly expressing love for their work. RM stated, "It's not work for me. I love doing it." The findings also revealed that the artisans were successful in leveraging such passion as an income source to support their families' livelihoods. As TT stated, "I love the art of weaving...plus it really support my income, not only to my family but the other weavers and artisans..."

Ingenuity at Every Step: From feeding the silkworms locally grown tapioca leaves, to using local vegetation for dyeing, this indigenous group has developed original techniques of sustainable production. Though traditional floor loom weaving was still used, the findings showed a recent shift towards the use of more "advanced" looms, such as frame and fly shuttle loom. A key reason for this evolution in weaving technology seemed to be the economic gains that resulted from it. WSS said, "Before, they still using the traditional floor loom which is time consuming and at the same time they earn very less. When I know how to use the frame loom, it's less time consuming and at the same time I am earning double."

Sustenance of the Artisan and their Art – Government Support: The data revealed that in the 1990s the Indian government setup cluster programs in this part of the NERI through the Department of Sericulture to train and promote artisans and their silk products. In addition to training with a stipend, they were provided with work sheds, spinning machines, looms and yarns. This government intervention, the participants claimed, revived an otherwise dying art form, providing an economic incentive to sustain the lives of the artisans and their art.

Weavers' Intent to Revive: In addition to government aid, a deep desire to revive and sustain the textile art form existed in the participants. As TT stated, "The art of weaving was dying, but I see something in there that I need to work for the community, for myself to revive again the traditional way of weaving, along with the modern techniques."

Discussion: This study found a deep connection between the women textile artisans of NERI and their art that was inherent within each individual. The pride of being a textile artisan contributed distinctly to their culture, while their passion for the art was met with economic incentives. Having developed a technique rich in tradition, the artisans, with the help of the government, found ways to sustain and enhance their skills and resources. Shining light on the life and work of such indigenous groups and their textile art can provide an insight into developing sustainable means of textile production and livelihood of textile workers across the world.

References

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