

Title: Weaving identity, Empowerment and Entrepreneurship of Lotha Women

Mhabeni W

PhD Scholar at TISS Guwahati off-campus

ABSTRACT

The contribution of women towards economic self-sufficiency forms an integral part of the family more so in today's generation. Women have been contributing alongside men in every aspect from generations to generations. However, the efforts women put towards her family income are unnoticed, unaccounted, and unappreciated. Weaving traditional clothes which is a traditional practice of Lotha women, contributes significantly towards family income at the same time creates an opportunity for entrepreneurship. This helps women attain gainful employment thereby improving the livelihood of her family. Furthermore, weaving traditional clothes also helps in preserving the identity of the Lotha Naga tribe. This paper will analyze the contribution of Lotha women through weaving towards the economic self-sufficiency of the family in particular and society in general. In the paper attempt will be made to highlight the challenges women experiences while striving for economic self-sufficiency through weaving.

Keywords: Weaving, Lotha Women, Family, Livelihood, Women Entrepreneurs, Identity

INTRODUCTION

Weaving in Nagaland is one of the largest unorganized sectors after agriculture and constitutes an integral part of the rural and semi-rural livelihood. Not only that, it is also the country's second largest employment generation sector next to agriculture. In 2014, Planning Commission of the government of India has revealed that the handloom sector, being labour intensive, provides livelihood to 4.3 million weavers and ancillary workers.

Nagaland being one of the regions in India which is consider as backward in terms of industrial development has high dependency on this age old profession. Women in Nagaland in general and Lotha¹ Women used to weave cloths initially for their respective households and family. Subsequently, gradual development in the economy created opportunity for the involvement of household women in various other forms of income generation activities. Rapid urbanization on the other hand impacted the technique of making hand woven cloths through traditional method to few individuals. However in recent years due to the rising purchasing power capacity and less supply of hand woven² cloths in the markets created demand for hand woven traditional attires in the state. Furthermore only a handful of people have been successful in making the traditional weaving designs and fabrics popular nationally and also globally. At present

¹ Lothas are one of the major tribes of Nagas in Nagaland, pre dominantly residing in Wokha district

² Hand woven here it means those traditional dress which are weave using the traditional loin loom

the weaving of traditional dresses and attires not only contributes towards generating family income but one can see that the labour of women in weaving traditional dress preserves the identity of Lotha Naga tribe.

Entrepreneurship plays a vital role in improving the economic status and bestows empowerment. Women entrepreneurship is a process where women initiates businesses independently or with a group of women in order to generate employment, enhance financial independence and improve the economic situation that involves risks and challenges. According to Government of India (GOI, 2006) has defined women entrepreneurs as a “*an enterprise owned and controlled by women having a minimum financial interest of 51% and giving at least 51% of the employment generated in the enterprise to women*”. Lal and Arora (2017) cited Singh’s definition of women entrepreneur as

“Confident, innovative and creative women capable of achieving self- economic independence individually or in collaboration, gives employment opportunities for others, initiating, establishing and running the enterprises by keeping pace with her personal, family and social life.”

Thus Lotha women undertaking activities in generating income through self-employment at the same time creating opportunity for empowering another person particularly woman through income generation can be considered as entrepreneurs.

Economic independence is the need of hours among the women in Nagaland, where unemployment problem is on the rise. Thus, to effectively counter this unemployment, self-employment through weaving has the ability to meet the economic and financial ends of the household at the same time safe guard the age old tradition and identity of the Lothas Naga tribe.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT THROUGH WEAVING

A woman needs to have access to social resources and economic opportunities to make strategic decisions in her life. In this case, weaving businesses are largely responsible for creating empowerment in woman. The weaving industry is therefore, expanding in many poor countries, targeting women from marginalized communities in particular. “Empowering women to participate fully in economic life across all sectors is essential to build stronger economies, achieve internationally agreed goals for development and sustainability, and improve the quality of life of women, men families, and communities,” according to U.N. Women. Sally Holkar, founder of Women Weave, said that this occupation not only provides financial security to women but can also lift them and their families out of poverty, which benefits the community at large (Rolz, 2016).

The term economic empowerment significantly promotes the capacity of women and men active involvement in an economic activity; thereby they contribute themselves and get benefit from weaving which plays an essential role in the country's economy. Women play an important

role in supporting their households despite the lack of infrastructure, economic opportunities, education, self-development, and maternal healthcare. They are also limited by gender roles and patriarchy which prevents them from improving their living conditions. The traditional weaving in Nagaland has been kept alive by the skilled household weavers linked with the age old practices of weaving spread all over the state. Weaving is one of the most skilled jobs among the Naga women and its survival is a remarkable line despite decline in some countries and it was wiped out in certain other countries as it has been replaced by the production of modern handloom textile products.

While interacting³ with Lotha weavers who are still using *tsirochunglung*⁴ it was learnt that most of the weavers use their skill and ability to help improve their livelihood. Zubeno Tsanglao, a weaver who has woven clothes for 45 years, today does not weave because of her health problem. Initially, she started weaving through a simple method called *Jo she* (the simple method which is used by beginner to weave) at the age of 6 weaving small clothe like *lepokzu* (machete rope), *sukvu* (bag), *rulan* (waist rope) for her parents and grandparents. And by the age of 13, she started weaving Shurum (women skirt or wrap round) and *osunnpemo* (shawls) using *tsirochunglung*. While interacting with her she mentioned that she began weaving for economic reasons, supplementing the income of the family and with this she support her children's education. She also wanted to have a sense of financial independence. She mentions that during her prime days, she sold her weaving by Rs. 4000-5500 per set but at present, it is more expensive⁵. Another weaver who is still weaving using *tsirochunglung*, Renjano Khuvung started weaving only in the year 2005 for personal use and more importantly to promote the traditional art of weaving as it is declining due to adoption of the machine loom. However, when people came to know that she weaved clothes, they started requesting her and place orders. She can now sell her weaved cloths by Rs. 6500 to 7000 per set (shawl and mekhala) which is helping her to generate income. With this income she purchases kitchen utensil and items like washing machine, refrigerators⁶.

Another weaver who is also using *tsirochunglung*, Oreno Patton mentioned that she started weaving because of financial problem. The meager salary of her husband alone is not sufficient to fulfill the needs of her family. Weaving traditional dress helped her as a source of income, thereby managing her kitchen requirements, purchase on other items like television, washing machine, and refrigerator and sometime even help her natal family. She said a set of traditional dress (both mekhala & shawl) is being sold by Rs. 6000-7000. She state that to complete a ladies shawl requires minimum of two days, for suit (mekhala and shawl) at least half a month, and for men

³ The datas are collected for writing M.phil dissertation by the writer during the year 2018-2019 at Wokha district

⁴ *Tsirochunglunga* means the whole set of weaving tools in traditional lion loom in Lotha dialect

⁵ Personal interview with Zubeno Tsanglao on 14th September 2108, Female, she used traditional tension loom for 45 year to weave cloth, she is now 65 years of age. Time: 4:30pm

⁶ Personal Interview with Renjano Khuvung on 15th September 2018, female. Still weaving traditional tension loom, age 45 years, time 7:00 Am

shawl a week to complete⁷. While interacting on the decline in the use of weaving using *tsirochunglung* all the women weaver have the same answer that is, because of health issues and time taking. It is pertinent to mention that women engaged in weaving clothes over a period of time suffers from long term side effects like eye problem, back pain, and sometimes even joint pain.

At present Lotha's are witnessing rise of women entrepreneurs who do not weave but takes the privilege of handloom and machine in weaving traditional dress as well as redesigning them into a new look. These designers are making themselves a name and brand not only among the Lothas but even in the whole state. Interacting on the new avenue in fashion using traditional dress, it serves as a way of promoting identity as well as a new way of being empowered and employed. NyanbeniTsopoe, a designer stated that she firmly believes that adapting to changing times and markets is not only ideal, but also a necessity in order to thrive. She added saying she has immense love and respect for the cultural heritage thereby drawing her inspiration for fashion. Transmuting and redesigning with changing times is a prerequisite of our culture to be more than just being a part of history. One designer dress can cost not less than Rs.3000 however, even though it is expensive and not everyone can effort it, she gets encouragement from clients, youths and parents of students⁸.



Source: Designer Mhayaniinstagram page (Lotha women Blazer)

It is gratifying that people are making use of their talents in designing clothes, especially traditional dress with the demands of people. However, the value of the traditional dress is been exchanged with commodities in today's market economy. This has made it easier for the designers for creativity paving way for the development of new styles, showing their identity without having the fear of reaction from the society. Barnen and Eicher (2008) the present time offers a great variety of styles and gives people the opportunity to reveal their identity. Every clothes carries

⁷ Personal interview with Oreno patton 49 years who is weaving traditional dress using loin loom for the past 15 plus years. Time 4:30 pm Place : Wokha

⁸Personal Interview with NyanbeniTsopoe Fashion Designer, Based in New Delhi, India. On 2nd Nov 2018, Kohima Nagaland, time- 2:00Pm

different message but is about how one looks at it. Therefore, the clothing of a person is a means of communication with the outside world. It is a way of telling people about the 'state' and the 'status' of its owner.

WEAVING IDENTITY

As observed by Stirn and Ham (2003: 152) every traditional piece of Naga wear is an expression of the Naga philosophy of life, world view, and traditional value. Similarly, Naga clothes and traditional Naga attire expresses a great aesthetic sense embedded in and shaped by the natural environment – a heightening of their deep awareness and understanding of being a part of nature. The present Naga textiles can hardly be compared in richness and diversity to the weaving that existed in their societies in the 19th to the mid-20th century. However, their sense of forms and much of the knowledge concerning traditional meanings of cloths are still alive. In the past, shawls which are to be worn by an individual were not a matter of individual's choice but clothes indicated social position like material status, wealth, commoner or aristocrat, warrior or feast giver, and clan of the wearer etc. Naga shawls, according to them range from a very simple white cloth to the elaborately designed warrior or rich man's shawl.

When we attempt to identify cultural identity of the Nagas today, it has become very indistinct and confusing because of the integration of modernization and political influence in Naga society. Stockhausen (2008) articulates the complexities of identity, especially in the context of the Nagas. Identity is equated with ethnicity depending on the context, refers either to a local culture or a culture shared by every Nagas. For example, during the candle light vigil in Kohima, against the killing of innocent civilian by Indian army on 4th and 5th December 2021 in Mon district, citizens were asked to come in their traditional attire. It is significant to note how clothes, in this case 'traditional clothes', are being used as a symbol of assertion for certain political gains.

In the past within the community, it was possible to identify by simply looking at the shawl of the wearer, even the village s/he comes from, her or his social status, whether s/he was a rich man or a commoner, and the number of *gennas* he had performed. In this context, J.P Mills (1922:13) observes that the clothes worn by different individuals of the Lothas are of various patterns and indicated the number of social *gennas* performed by the wearer. Clothes identify the wearer's position in the village. To name a few, among the Lothas, a man who performed the first Social *genna* may wear *phangdrup*. A man who had completed all the social ceremonial can wear *lungpensu*, and a man of noted warrior can dress in *rikyüsü*, which is rarely used at present. *Rikyüsü* is similar to the rich men's shawl worn by the AoNagas. The centre part of the shawl is stitched in white yarn and has a symbolic representation of a human head, head of an elephant, tiger, *mithun* horns, hornbill and other birds were woven on it.

During the field work it was found out that at present only few weavers use *tsirochunglung* to weave clothes mostly because it is tiresome and also due to its ill effects on health. One weaver Renjano Khuvung⁹ started weaving only in the year 2005 for personal use and mostly to promote the traditional art of weaving as it is threatened by the adoption of machine loom. According to her, people are after machines as the products made from the machines are cheaper. However, she was also of the view that the qualities of the finished product made from machines are not reliable unlike those of the hand woven products. According to her, even though *tsirochunglung* is tiresome, dresses made from it are still high in demand. The demand is driven from those people who want to keep it for personal use and preserve the traditional dress and also by those who prefer to go for quality. Discussing with Loreni Tsanglao, who started weaving since 1987, using *tsirochunglung* said that there are only few people who weave using the old method. She added the demand for dresses weaved through *tsirochunglung* is high because people are learning the importance of preserving the ‘authentic’ traditional clothes for identity. She further mentioned,

*“Ever since the year I started weaving, I am only weaving the Lotha ‘authentic’ traditional dress even though there are many new modified designs that has come out. This ‘authentic’ dress is on the verge of disappearing because there only one or two of us who encourage weaving through *tsirochunglung*. Some people go for the redesigned and colourful ones, giving less important for the original one. To identify which one is ‘authentic’ we can know by *sumung* (the middle part of the mekhala) which is usually more decorated than the rest of the dress and is blue in colour. I encourage other weavers to weave this authentic dress because this is our identity of being Lotha. And if we stop using it, others can filch the pattern and colour combination mixing with their own traditional dress. To complete a ladies shawl only two days, suit (wrap round and shawl) at least half a month and men shawl a week to complete¹⁰.”*



Sources: by researcher 19th Sep 2018

⁹Personal Interview with Renjano Khuvung on 15th September 2018, female. Still weaving using traditional tension loom, age 45 years, time 6:30 Am

¹⁰ Personal interview with Loreni Tsanglao on 15th September 2018, still weaving using traditional loom for the last 32 years, Age 50 years, place Wokha, time 11:30 Am

From the discussion with the weavers it can be align with the importance of using clothes as a symbol that is found in the work of Barnard (2002). He wrote that the symbolism of clothing is another part of delivering the message that a person tries to put into it. The symbolism may touch any part of people's life. A symbol, according to him, which is used in expressing a feeling of belonging to some group and class often deals with ethnicity and identity. At this point one can make sense from the interactions that Lothas wear traditional dress to stand out among others. Their main objective behind wearing traditional dress is to identify themselves and to create a sense of oneness and belongingness. The fear of losing identity keeps pushing the Lothas to continue with innovative ideas to wear something that is of their identity and tradition.

LOTHA WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS

Entrepreneurship helps women become economically independent and improve their financial situation which contributes to their household income, children education and career, better family lifestyle, properties etc. It not only contributes to the family, but helps in creation of jobs which eases the burden of unemployment problem in the state. Through entrepreneurship, women can reach a new horizon of economic and social development of the State.

In the past Lotha women actively engaged themselves in exchange of goods especially with the people of Assam for example cotton and black sesame and other products like ginger, dried chillies, yam, wet and dried bamboo shoots with salt, iron, dried fish, duck and jute etc(Enie,2016). Women also actively participated in the whole process of cultivating and processing raw materials for trading. As Kikon (2016)state that for centuries the process of farming cotton and indigo, spinning, weaving, and dyeing cotton textiles was done by women and traded huge amount of cotton not only to people living in plains areas but to the neighboring tribes as well. According to Kikon, women performed nearly 90% of the agriculture work sustaining the lives of the population, but that did not necessarily endow them with economic and political influence. Rather, women were accumulated like commodities and their contribution in the form of labour for the economic enhancement of their husband is not taken into account (ibid).

At present entrepreneurship helps Lotha women to a great extend to empower themselves. Different types of business activities are carried out by Lotha women, of which some are in the formal sector whereas, majority like the street vendor and home-based business activities are in the informal sector. As per data collected by Jami (2021) from the office of Wokha district chamber of commerce and industry (WDCC&I), there were 496 registered businesses of various kinds in WokhaTown in the year 2020. This business comprise of cosmetic shops, apparels, household appliances, electronic, groceries. Live-stocks, vegetables and fruits vendors, hardware, furniture, tea stalls, hotel and service, out of which 156 shops are registered by Lotha women which comes up to around 31.45%.

A significant number of Lotha women in Wokha town are engaged in street vending, second-hand vendors, fruits and vegetables vendors which are carried out in residential as well as in commercial areas. These activities constitute the sole source of livelihood for many families. Many of these women are from low-income group engage in these businesses as it requires little capital with no specialized skill and no training required. As Chand(2016) states, the used garments dumped by the East Asian countries in India are sought after in Nagaland. Korean clothes are in great demand because of their style, quality, cheap pricing and cultural influences of South Korean soaps and movies. Majority of the Lotha Women engaged in second hand good business are married and doing business out of self-interest to supplement income for fulfilling their various requirements. Fruits and vegetables vendors in Lotha society are predominantly women. In the past, women used two types of basket (pharu and okhyak) made of bamboo with a sling attached to it. However, at present the selling of items from door to door has been decreased and replaced by street vendors at authorized market areas. Most of the street vendors are the sole earning members of the family and their participation in vending is mainly due to economic compulsion. The income generated through the vending supports children's education and household maintenances as their spouse are either unemployed or spent their earning on drinking and gambling (Jami, 2021).

Generally, in Nagaland the market trade is mostly dominated by women traders and they are doing well. Among the Lotha women, it started with weaving clothes, tirelessly selling items door to door and doing petty business. It is an age old tradition that Lotha women engaged themselves in one way or the other in the market trade for generating income. At present women entrepreneurs are increasing which is traced out as an extension of their kitchen activities. With growing awareness about business and spread of education, Lotha women have started shifting from kitchen to become more assertive and empowered entrepreneurs involving in competitive and productive activities. As Nandy & Kumar (2014) stated, women successfully competed with man and have stood up with man in every walk of life and business. And these women are assertive, persuasive and willing to take risk. Lotha women entrepreneurs are manufacturing handloom emporium, stitching, knitting, weaving, designing, crochet, custom jewelry making, pickles making, dry fruits preservations, baking etc. which are emerging exceedingly successful.

CONCLUSION

Weaving is an integral part of the Naga heritage and culture. In the past, all attires were woven on the traditional loin loom. There is a need of acknowledging the significance and openness to new concepts thereby bring a more positive understanding of the women's participation in the economic activities. As for many of these women working in the handlooms sector or weaving is a matter of contributing economically to the family besides generating income and supplying clothes

for the family members. Increasing productivity by working as full time rather than part time will make handlooms production more sustainable for livelihood. Weaving being a traditional feminine occupation, many women whether educated or illiterate finds job in this sector. Therefore, suitable public policies for handloom sector can pave the way for larger scale production at the same time employment opportunities can be created for the women of the region.

There is a central link between traditional dress and one's identity in every society. In the past traditional dress identifies the individual status however, at present it identifies the community as a whole. Though there has been a series of transformation in traditional dress be it re-designing, weaving and wearing, its role of indicating wearer's identity is always shown. Designers and weavers are cautious with the patterns of the old traditional dress, as they infuse with modern elements and materials. In order to promote the rich material culture of the Nagas and preserve the identity, the government has been taking initiative through handloom and handicraft production which in turn helps the local weavers and artisan to be economically self-sufficient.

Reference

- Barnes, R and J, Eicher.(ed). 2008 ‘ *Dress and Gender: Making and Meaning In cultural context* ’ , Oxford Providence
- Chand, A. 2016. “Nagaland Wears Used Korean Clothes,” *The New Indian Express*, December,2016. <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2016/dec/05/nagalandwears-used-korean-clothes-1545907.html>.
- Enie, Lichumo. 2016. “Trade Relationship between Naga and Ahom.” PhD thesis, unpublished Nagaland University.
- Jami, pansy (2021) “ Role of Lotha women in the business activities in Wokha town” ed. In Nienu, Eyingbeni Humtsoe, Patton Abeni, W Mhabeni ‘ Lotha women in the 21st century celebrating progress, advocating Gender equality’
- Kikon, Rosanna. 2016. “Women, Polygyny and Economy: An Analysis on the Pre Colonial Naga Society of North East India with Special Reference to the Lotha Nagas.” *Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 21, 9. 5(September): 84-89.
- Lal Keertika, Arora VPS. 2017. *Women Entrepreneurship: An Overview of Indian Scenario*. International Journal of Enterprise Computing and Business Systems. ISSN (online): 2230-8849 Vol. 7 issue 1
- Rolz, Isabella, women weave, female report UN women, UN TV Feb 26th 2016
- Stirn, Aglaja and Ham, Peter Vam. 2003. ‘*The Hidden World of the Nagas: Living Traditions in Northeast India and Burma*’ Prestle, New York