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The Traditional Dyeing Process with Special Reference to Chakhesang Naga

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Abstract

Colour is one of the elements of nature that made human living more aesthetic and fascinating. It is associated with emotions, seasons, festivals and passion in one's life. Traditions and culture has been an integral part of the Nagas. They have traditionally been using dyed-cloth from plants since time immemorial. Plants were traditionally used in combination for the extraction and preparation of dyes through indigenous processes. Even before the written records, the tribe women possessed the knowledge of cotton cultivation, cotton spinning, dyeing and weaving. The present study is an appreciation of the knowledge of our ancestors in bringing out the traditional method of dyeing clothes, creating awareness of traditional skills to the modern generation and also to preserve the traditional knowledge in written record. The study will enable to comprehend our age-old arts and skills and create awareness of the pressing need to safeguard our unique heritage. The study shall also inform the present generation of the use of more sustainable methods and less harmful to the environment. In addition, the outcome of the study will enable to expand one's knowledge of the historical practices and customs. The study shows the

decline of indigenous practice of weaving and dyeing in the present generation is due to lack of traditional knowledge as well as the introduction of cheap and fast fashion in the modern market. The study concludes that efforts must be made to preserve the indigenous techniques of dyeing using organic resources.

Keywords: Naga, Chakhesang, dyeing, traditional, culture, process.

I. Introduction

The Nagas are indigenous tribal inhabiting the state of Nagaland situated in North East India. Nagas in particular have 17 major tribes, each occupying a distinct area. In the Naga society, there is no class or caste. Each Naga tribe has its legend to give some indication of the course from which its migration took place. A tribe is distinguished by its language and custom.

The Naga culture is colourful, traditional attires, shawls; wrap-around, etc. are colourful. The rich culture and traditions, loyalty and hospitality are some hallmarks of these tribes. One would identify the use of many eye-catching colour combinations in their traditional attires. Each tribe and sub-tribe produce their unique designs and colours of shawls of both men and women, women wrap around, kilt and sash of men, etc. with decorative objects such as spears, animals, birds and even planetary objects such as sun, moon and stars. The Naga culture also includes songs, dance and music is an essential and integral part of its tradition.

One of the major traditional arts in Nagaland is the art of weaving which the women among these tribal do. Handloom weaving is an age-old practice, the oldest and one of the most universally practiced crafts. It is an important element in everyday life of the people since this is one of the largest family-based traditional industries. The art of spinning, weaving and dyeing among the Nagas remained an exclusive domain of the women. Traditionally, among all Nagas during courtship, men adore women who have the skill of spinning and weaving. It is considered taboo for a man to spin, weave, or dye in the Naga tradition. It is believed, men indulging in feminine work would incapacitate them from pursuing activities like hunting, fishing, wrestling, etc.

The tribeswomen were expected to know the traditional skills like spinning, weaving, dyeing, pounding, husking rice, etc. The art of weaving was handed down from one generation to the next or from mother to daughter. Every girl was trained to weave as they were supposed to weave the family's clothes and make themselves self-reliant.

Weaving is an integral part of a woman's life in the Chakhesang community. A skilled weaver is highly regarded and respected in the community. Young girls have been given a set of weaving tools to use in order to begin learning the craft of weaving. Carding and ginning cotton thread were all tasks performed by female labourers. They also spun, dyed and wove the thread. Threads or yarns were dyed before weaving into clothes. Like any other tribal society, the Chakhesang too had their traditional method of creating dyes. The process was elaborate and numerous taboos were perceived. The method of dyeing cloths in Nagaland is endemic and hand-produced. Before the 1920s, this has been the only method of colouring clothes; however, after the introduction of coloured yarn from

Burma and the introduction of synthetic colours in Europe, dyeing culture began to go away.

Objectives: The study is undertaken with the objectives to comprehend the creativity of our ancestors in bringing out the traditional method of dyeing clothes. And also it aims to create an awareness of an ancient traditional skill to the modern period.

Study Area: The present study focuses on the traditional practices of weaving and dyeing of the Chakhesang Naga tribe. Chakhesang Naga tribe is the indigenous inhabitants of Phek district locating in the south-eastern part of the State. Chakhesang is one of the major tribes of Nagas. The Chakhesangs were previously known as 'Eastern Angami'. There are valuable treasures passed down from generation to generation that may be seen in its cultural wealth and traditions with the Chakhesang tribesmen. The region has been named as "the Land of Traditions" for this very simple reason. Chakhesang people are fond of festivals and celebrations. Festivals are not only a merry-making event, but it showcases talents, customs, art and dances and so on. Amongst others, traditional magnificent architectural woodcraft displayed in front of their house and village gates alongside the Mithun horns and heads, making earthen pots (pottery), etc., were some of the items, showcased during festivals. Hence, the festivals are in fact a mega event showcasing the life and culture of the Chakhesang people.

In the next section II, culture of weaving such as cotton ginning, carding and spinning is presented. The procedure of dyeing colours is discussed in section III, while summary and suggestions have been highlighted in concluding section IV.

II. Method of weaving

Weaving is a centuries-old practice among the Chakhesang Naga tribe, and it is still popular today. The exuberance and festive mood are expressed in their attire. Weaving is done mostly on the days when women are off from working in the fields. The men manufacture the loom made out of wood and bamboo, grown locally in the forest. The women sit on their looms for long hours weaving the horizontally stretched threads back and forth. The process of weaving is still primitive and tedious. The shawls are colourful and neatly designed. They love to wear traditionally woven dresses during cultural events as it provides them with an avenue for sustenance. Older women who are physically weak to work in the field did the traditional weaving procedure like spinning, fluffing or carding, ginning and picking cotton.

Weaving is the craft of lacing fibers together to make fabric or cloth. One cannot understand the dyeing of colours without knowing the art of weaving and its different patterns and colours mixture into the desired material. Simple back strap loom with a continuous horizontal warp made up of six sticks that serve as the lease rod, warp beam, beating sword, heddle stick and in addition to the other functions. In order to establish the loom, first the warp beam must be firmly connected to the wall of the house or to any other acceptable kind of support that will allow the loom to be put in a horizontal position. Two loops of bark string have been placed onto thereafter. The spacing between the loops and the length of the shawl is determined by the length of previously woven piece of fabric which is already in a fixed position. Generally, it used to have distance equal to a little longer than the width of the piece of cloth that is to be weaved. In order for the weaving belt to be fastened to the lower bar or cloth beam, it is notched at

either end. The belt then is worn by the operator on her back. She can maintain the appropriate tension on the warp while sitting on a low seat in front of the loom with her feet pushing on a sturdy support. With the belt around her waist, she sits on a bar attached to a beam that is either linked to a wall or two stakes in the ground, keeping the required tension on her back. The warp threads are used to create the cloth's patterns, which are created by combining a variety of colours.

Each tribe and sub-tribe produce their unique designs and colours of shawls for both men and women, wrap-around skirt of women, kilt, the sash of men, etc. with decorative items like pleats, mithun, elephant, butterfly, spears, flower, peacock, even planetary things including stars, moon and sun. For example, the *Thüpikhü* shawl of the Chakhesangs is embroidered with ten patterns except the spear and is worn by those who have offered feast of merit. *Rira* shawl of the Chakhesang is the most popular and common for men sewed in spear pattern. While women wear *Rura* shawl embroidered in bone pattern.

Cotton ginning: Ginning is the art of removing seeds or deseeding from the harvested cotton balls. Deseeding cotton is simpler when the cotton is warm and dry. Rolling the cotton on a flat stone with a rolling pin removes the seeds. Cotton is one of the world's oldest basic materials and it has been used for centuries. Depending on the culture, it can be defined in a variety of ways. Only a small section of the Jhum field is used to cultivate cotton though it is an essential product to the indigenous Nagas. However, if it is favourable then even in that small area cultivation could yield plenty for their home requirements. Those areas or villages, which are not favourable for growing cotton, they purchased from others in exchange for other food grains. Traditionally cotton textile played an important role in Naga society.

Cotton Carding: Carding is the process to comb out the tangled fibers. A small-sized bow is flicked over the cotton to fluff after it has been cleansed of its seeds, while also, removing most of the remaining impurities. The fluffed cotton is rolled on a woman's thigh. Then the cotton thread or ball is ready for a spin.

Spinning: The method of spinning is primitive and involves simple tools. The spindle is handmade from a bamboo stick. The spindle is formed of a long hardwood spike with a tip at the bottom, having the maximum thickness directly above this point. Above this, there is a round flat stone spindle-whorl, cut, trimmed and bored in the middle, through which the wooden stem is passed from the other end. For stability, a cloth is placed over the pot-sherd-covered tip of a spindle weighted by these stones. By hand, with the aid of a round stick, the clean cotton is carefully rolled into sausages that resemble silvers and lay out on a flat stone or board to dry. The thread is coiled into a type of double *T-shaped* stick after it has been spun on the spindle. It is then unwound and immersed in hot rice water, where it hardens as it dries, before being coiled onto a lightweight bamboo frame. It is twisted into a ball using this frame as a guide. The cotton thread is then spun into yarn. When the thread is unwound, the yarn is ready for dyeing and weaving.

III. The procedure of dyeing

It is likely that humans discovered dye-producing plants as a result of their natural curiosity about the traditional dyes that have played such a significant role in human civilization. Colours were traditionally connected with many cultural rites and rituals in ancient times, but this has changed recently. The word "Dye" comes from an ancient English word that means

"colour," which is derived from the word "daeg" or "daeh". The art of dyeing was as old as human civilization. Generally, women carried out the whole process of dyeing and followed certain restrictions to avoid unscrupulous premonition. The entire process of dyeing was meticulous and demanded caution and therefore, the products are generally a trifle expensive. The process of dyeing of any colour was restricted before the harvest; for they believed that it may detriment the crops. The process of dyeing was carried out outside the village jurisdiction, either in the fields or in the riverside.

Typically, an earthen pot was used to prepare the dye materials as well as the yarn. It was usually not recommended to reuse the pot for other cooking purposes. Pregnant women were prohibited to handle the dyeing procedure to avoid harming the foetus. Lactating mothers were off bounds. Also, outsiders were not allowed to speculate during the dyeing process. During the process of dyeing, women were not allowed to consume food until the entire process was completed. In the Chakhesang Naga tribe, for the preparation for the *Sükrünye* festival, tribeswomen usually dye new yarn every year and reuse old clothes to celebrate the festival. Hence, the course of dyeing has been an annual activity. Weaving and dyeing are of women's affair. Therefore, it was a common practice that every woman weaves for the family members.

Colours like black, yellow and red have been extracted and derived from roots, barks, leaves, flowers, charcoal, mud, etc.

Black colour: The black dye is obtained from the shrub called Assam Indigo and Chinese Rain Bell (*Strobilanthes flaccidifolius*). *Lotüpri* in Chokri dialect where both the leaves and stem of the shrub are cut into small pieces and heated in an earthen pot. The shrub is cooked for at least an hour. The

leaves and residues are strained and the thread is merged into the solution and bubbled until it is completely black. The yarn is then taken out and dried in the sun. On the second day, the same process is continued until the desired colour is achieved. Another means to obtain the black colour is by using the bark of Oak tree (*quercus griffithii*) called *dutshu*[1] in Khezha dialect. Here the bark of the tree is removed and mixed with mud and pounded charcoal into an earthen pot and cooked. The process is repeated until the desired colour is obtained.

Red colour: The colour red is obtained from the bark of a tree called *Ezutshu*[2] in Khezha dialect (*leucaena leucocephala*). The bark of this tree is used as a colouring agent; it is mixed with the roots of a creeper plant called *Emi* in Khezha dialect (*rubia edgeworthii*). The roots of this creeper are beaten, split, and dried in the sun properly. These two plants are cooked together to produce the colour; the process is continued until the desired colour is reached.

Yellow colour: The yellow colour is obtained from a tree called *Athuo* in Angami dialect Oregon Grape (*Mahonia Japonica*). After removing its bark, the wood part is sliced into small pieces and boiled with the yarn. The whole process is repeated until the desired colour is acquired. Another way to produce yellow dye is by using the flower of a tree called *Mekhabo*[3] in Khezha dialect Panicled Butterfly Bush (*Buddleja paniculata*). The flower or budding of this *Mekhabo* flower is yellowish-white in colour, thus it results in favourable colour. The flowers are cooked with the thread until the colour is obtained. The dyeing thread is sundried and ready to weave.

[1] The same is called *Phrii* in Chokri dialect.
[2] The same is called *Züsüh* in Chokri dialect.
[3] The same is called *Mechüsüh* in Chokri dialect.

Challenges of traditional dyeing process

Due to the wide range of applications for dyes in the present era of development, dyes have risen to become the most valuable resource. Traditional fibres are being phasing out in favour of synthetic fibres because of their comfort, ease of availability and low-cost. Synthetic dyes are also available in a variety of colours. The modern technology has brought about changes even in weaving technology and traditional practices. Weavers are now relying more on the market for a substantial portion of their raw materials. Furthermore, people choose to acquire low-cost textile machines rather than traditional handlooms as a result of the rise in population and the expansion of textile industries. Machine-made clothes are wearable in all seasons and also more cost-effective. However, it is to be noted that in textile industries, more balls of cotton are utilized for synthetic dyeing. Industrialization has brought about natural dyes along with cottage industries both in urban as well as rural areas putting the traditional practices at a disadvantage position, which is in fact a serious challenge. Hence, because of the availability of synthetic dyes in the market, there is hardly any need for the community to practice their detailed dye-making process which is expensive and time consuming. Thus, the market competition and the convenient way of weaving and dyeing is pushing the art of tradition weave and dyeing into extinction.

IV. Conclusion

The traditional dyeing methods are biodegradable and eco-friendly compared to synthetic colours. The indigenous traditional knowledge on various resources including dye and fiber yielding plants is an essential part of our life. As a result, systematic approaches with a scientific attitude would help the conservation of economically important plants as well

as the indigenous knowledge base available locally. Despite technological advancements, there is a need to resuscitate the practice of natural dyeing for a more sustainable living.

It is therefore, observed that the traditional techniques and methods need to be documented in written and oral form to disseminate the knowledge to the present and future generations. Also, introducing programs for such related projects for students and professionals must be initiated by community as well as by the Government agencies. Hence, organising workshops and seminars on the importance of natural dyeing will enrich the knowledge of the contemporary period. It also must aim to develop more sustainable ways of living through dyeing and weaving so that it will create harmony between the sustainability and environmentally conducive for the upcoming generation. Hence, it will also enable the modern factories to reduce the use of artificial chemical resources. Furthermore, efforts should be made to create livelihood opportunities for both men and women in this area of profession in order to create an alternative to white collar jobs.

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