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The Weaving Culture Among the Misings of Assam, India

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Abstract

India is a land of diverse culture, religion and communities. North-east India as well as Assam is a considered to be a cultural hub of diverse ethnic groups each having its own traditions, culture, dress, food habits etc. The culture of the tribals of North-east India is incomplete without the weaving culture which has been practiced since time immemorial. The Misings, an ethnic group of Assam has also significantly contributed to the weaving culture of Assam showing the artistic talent of the women folks. Weaving culture is common among the rural Misings and the weaving loom is found almost in every household. Although with the impact of modernization, weaving culture is becoming commercialized but still now it is considered to be a symbol of love and affection among the rural Misings women of Assam. With the above background, an attempt is made in this paper to understand the importance of weaving culture among the Misings of Assam.

Keywords: Culture, Ethnic group, Misings, Weaving loom

1. Introduction

The Misings constitute the second largest scheduled tribe (Plains) of Assam after the Bodos with a population of 5.9 lakh (2001 Census). They belong to the Tibeto-Burman ethnic group and were formerly known as Miris. Although Misings are found in different areas of Assam, they are mainly concentrated in the riverine areas of Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Sibsagar, Jorhat, Golaghat and Sonitpur districts of Assam. The Misings have its own unique traditional and cultural practices which differentiate the ethnic group from other group. Among various cultural practices, weaving culture has played an important role in shaping the cultural identity of Misings. The weaving loom is found in every household of rural Misings and women folks contribute a lot to the development of this culture showing their artistic talents. The Misings women are expert in weaving and their skill to combine colours and designs have given them a special position in Assamese clothing culture. Weaving loom among the Misings is a symbol of love and affection and it is basically a home-craft made of handmade loom. The techniques of weaving and unique floral design (known as Gamik) have been handed down over generations. The weaved out dresses namely- Ege-gasor, Rihbi (a sheet with narrow stripes, wrapped to cover), Gaseng (used for the same purpose as that of rihbi, but having broad stripes of contrastive colours), Gero (a sheet, usually off-white wrapped round the waist to cover the lower part of the body, or round the chest to cover the body down to the knees or so), Dumer, Mibu Galung etc. are worn on various occasions and festivals. The traditional dresses made from the weaving loom of Misings are nowadays becoming very popular among the greater Assamese society due to its uniqueness in floral design.

With the above background, an attempt is made in this paper to understand the importance of weaving culture and also explore the prospects of weaving among the Misings of Assam in particular.

2. Significance of the Study

India as well its north-eastern part including Assam is a cultural hub of many diverse cultures, each having its unique traditions, culture, dress pattern and food habits. The Misings, one of the major tribes of Assam has also its own social, cultural, economic and traditional practices. Among various cultural and traditional practice among the Misings, the weaving culture is considered as to a major one without which the culture and tradition of Misings is incomplete. However, with the impact of modernization, changes are also noticed in weaving culture. Nowadays, weaving products are also considered to be a source of income to the rural poor.

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Thus, an attempt has been made to understand the importance of this culture and also to explore the prospects involved this culture. Although there have been many tribal studies in India based on tribal economy, land alienation, socio-economic development, tribal culture, etc, the studies related to the Mising Tribe of Assam are still highly limited. Hence, the present research work bears immense academic significance and practical utility particularly in understanding the weaving culture among the Misings of Assam. Moreover, the findings derived from the study would provide inputs to the development planners and policy makers for overall progress of the tribal communities in general and the Misings in particular.

3. Objectives

The main objectives of the present study are:

To understand weaving as a cultural practice among the Misings women of Assam in general and selected villages in particular; to know how weaving contributes to the cultural as well as socio-economic well-being of the Misings of Assam; to evolve strategies and suggest measures for the development of weaving among the Misings women .

4. Database and Methodology

The study is based on primary and secondary data. Existing literature available in various journals, books, etc. related to the topic has been consulted with a view to develop a broad theoretical framework of the present research in right perspective. Primary data relating to the study have been

collected from some Mising dominated villages of Jonai Revenue Circle of Dhemaji district namely-Bahir Jonai Pathar, No.1 Bahir Jonai, No.1 Tarajan, No.1 Rigbi, Jonekareng, Mahmara, Bijoypur Ujani, No.1 Miri Tako, Dikhari and Somkong Dambuk. The data obtained have been processed and analysed using some simple but meaningful statistical techniques for objective and logical interpretation in the forms of maps and diagrams. Conclusions on the study area are drawn on the basis of the results derived from the data analysis and personal experience gathered through the observations.

5. Geographical Background of the Study Area

Assam, located in the tropical latitudes (24.3° N and 28° N) and eastern longitudes (89.5° E and 96.1° E), is the most populous state in North-East India. It is surrounded on three sides by hills and mountains. The rivers Brahmaputra and Barak, in the north and south respectively, carve out deep valleys, which represent the major part of the state. Between the two valleys there lies a strip of highland made up by hills and plateaus (Taher, 2007). The state covers an area of 78,438 km². It is surrounded by Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh on the north; by Mizoram, Meghalaya and Tripura on the south; by Nagaland and Manipur on the east; and by West Bengal and Bangladesh on the west. It is connected with the mainland of India through a narrow corridor of 40 km width in West Bengal in the west. (Fig.1)

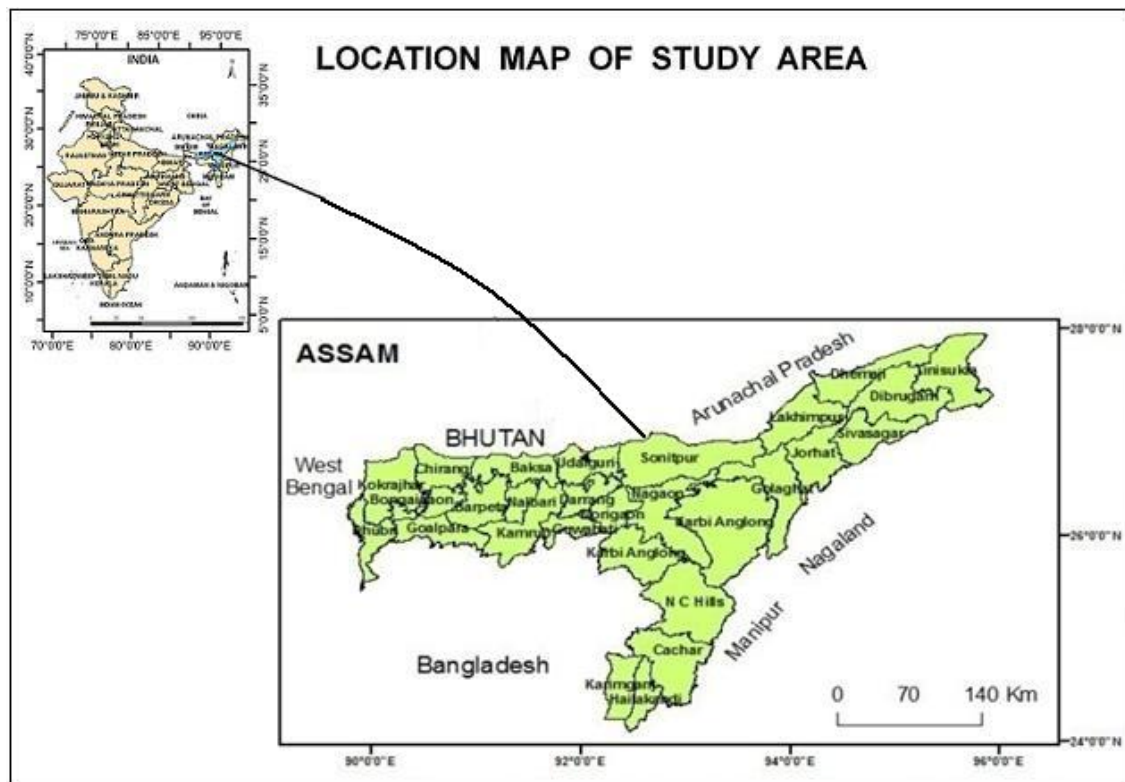


Fig 1:

6. Analysis and Discussions

Weaving culture among Misings is as old as its civilization and it is hard to pinpoint exactly when and who developed it. It is an indispensable part of Mising culture and without it, their culture and tradition is incomplete. The culture of the tribe is reflected through the colorful dresses they wear.

Weaved out products from the loom is an essential part in their festivals and occasions and one cannot part with it. Among the Misings it is compulsory to dress in self woven clothes during their weddings. The unique floral design known as “Gamik” distinguishes it from other design of their fellow ethnic groups. Priority is given to bright colours using

different colour threads like red, black, green, orange etc. It is found that mostly women are engaged in weaving and in some rare case only male are found among the Misings. Weaving among the Misings are practiced mainly as a home-craft. But nowadays with the impact of modernization and demand of their products among their counterparts have led in the process of commercialization. However, commercialization of the weaved products are found to be very low because of various associated factors like lack of proper infrastructural, Govt. support, adequate market facilities and many other factors. It cannot be denied that weaving industry contributes as a source of income for the rural poor.

Weaving loom is considered as a symbol of love and affection among the Mising women and through this they show their artistic talent in the form of beautiful floral design. Historically, it is known that Misings are peace-loving tribes and they want to remain close to the natural surroundings which is exhibited in the form of colorful floral design they curve out in their traditional dresses indicating their association with nature. Most of the designs are derived from common flowers, plants, birds, animals etc.

Table 1: Table relating to various aspects of weaving in the selected villages, 2013

Sample Survey Area	No. of Sample Households	Households having weaving looms (in %)	Weaving as a source of income
1. Bahir Jonai Pathar	30	96.66	30.00
2. No.1 Bahir Jonai	30	93.33	20.00
3. No.1 Tarajan	30	96.66	30.30
4. No.1 Rigbi	30	90.00	26.66
5. Jonekareng	30	90.00	16.66
6. Mahmara	30	93.33	23.33
7. Bijoypur Ujani	30	96.66	16.66
8. No.1 Miri Tako	30	100.00	30.00
9. Dikhari	30	100.00	33.33
10. Somkong ambuk	30	96.66	36.66

Source: Primary Survey, 2013.

From the surveyed villages, it is clearly witnessed that more than 90 per cent of the rural Mising dominated areas have weaving looms in their household. It is noticed that weaving is done by the weavers in their traditional weaving loom and the dresses made are mainly done for their own use and not for marketing purpose. Commercialization of the products is found to be very low and weaving as a source of income is below 40 per cent (Table.1). From this data it is quite clear that the Misings practice weaving mainly for their own use.



Plate 2: Women in weaving loom



Plate 1: Weaving Loom

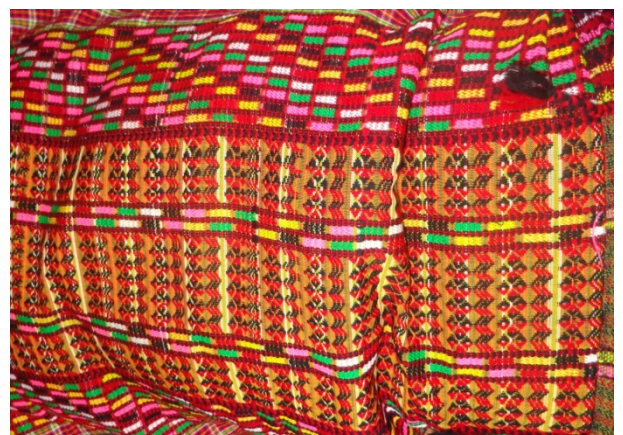


Plate 3 (a): Unique floral designs



Plate 3 (b): Unique floral designs

Marketing facilities is very weak due to which the handloom sector in those villages cannot be linked with the adequate markets. However, it is seen that in those villages many Self Help Groups have come out with the intention of developing this sector and providing proper market by organizing special exhibition cum sales

7. Conclusions

The foregoing discussions reveal that Misings practice weaving mainly as a cultural practice and the commercialization is quite low. However, it is found that with the help of some Govt. supports and Self help groups, it is gaining popularity among their fellow counterparts. Proper marketing is required for the adequate supply of the material made from weaving. Their traditional craft of weaving has a very bright future prospects if nurtured properly with the help of government support and proper training so their they can maintain their traditional practice and also become economically independent through it.

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