

Sustainable Livelihood Prospects: Bishnupriya Manipuri Ethnic Community's Handloom And Handicrafts In Assam

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ARTICLE INFO ABSTRACT

The so This study examines the complex connections between students' resilience, self-worth, and mental health while taking gender and residential area disparities into account. Assessing the connection between resilience and self-esteem, resilience and, mental health, and the positive With the help of observational and ethnographical approach, this study tries to analyse the impact of Bishnupriya Manipuri handloom and handicrafts entrepreneurship development, their problems, and prospects of marketing. The research findings revealed that despite a rapid socio-economic change of context, the Bishnupriya Manipuri housing practice is deeply connected to their socio-cultural and religious values. But weak technical equipment applied in the Bishnupriya Manipuri handicraft sector found to have significant impacts on enterprise income, total expenditure, and income at the household level. It is recommended that the Government should give emphasis on developing ethnical enterprises. Non-government organizations should co-operate developing ethnical product interests.

Keywords: Ethnicity, Business, Handicrafts, Bishnupriya Manipuri.

Introduction:

The Manipuris are divided, from a linguistic point of view, into two groups, namely, Meiteis and the Bishnupriyas. Meiteis entered Manipur from the East; their language is of the Tibeto-Burman group and the Bishnupriya Manipuris came from West of Manipur, India and are of the Indo-Aryan (citation). The Meitei is most probably derived from Mai = people (comp. Burmese mai = man) + Tai = the Tai people) and the term Bishnupriya, from Bishnupur, the name of the place in Manipur + "iya" a suffix coming from Sanskrit ika and meaning 'relating to' The language of the Bishnupriya Manipuris is called 'Bishnupriya Manipuri'. G. A. Grierson calls it 'Bishnupriya Manipuri' while Dr. S.K. Chatterjee calls it simply 'Bishnupriya'. The Bishnupriya-Manipuri is a endangered ethnic group of Northeast India residing in some parts of Assam, Tripura, Manipur and Bangladesh. From the point of numerical strength it is found that 'the number of speakers of this language, according to a random sampling held in 1966, was about 90,000 in India and about 45,000 in Bangladesh' (Sinha, K. P. 1975: 7). The Bishnupriya Manipuri community language is considered as a vulnerable by UNESCO as only 72899 speakers of the language are available around the globe ^{W1-5}. The distant history of Manipur is veiled in enigma, yet there are signs of a highly developed civilization during those ancient times. While the Aryans were making their way through Burma and the far East, they unintentionally missed the region of Manipur, where a cultured population thrived (Jamestone J. Sir 1896). In antiquity, a noteworthy Aryan group, identified as Bishnupriya-Manipuris, with a distinct lineage, traversed through Manipur and eventually settled in Burma in prehistoric epochs. The Hinduism observed in those ancient periods probably had its roots in caste prejudices and exhibited notable variations from its contemporary manifestation (Dun, E. 1992). Nath R.M. (1948) studied that the political scandal of killing fathers by their sons, brothers by their siblings greatly affected Garib Nawaj and making him extremely sensitive about the situation. As a result, he issued a command to destroy all historical records, both ancient

and recent, throughout the Manipur history and in the process any traces of ancient Manipur and that of Bishnupriya Manipuri along with the Meiteis concurrent socio-political records are all destroyed. From their home Manipur, the Bishnupriya Manipuris spread over to other parts of India. In India, a significant Bishnupriya Manipuri population settled in the state of Assam and Tripura. Bishnupriya Manipuri also has their settlement in Bangladesh and Burma, and other overseas countries.

Though Bishnupriya Manipuri economy is mostly depending upon farming, these Bishnupriya Manipuri over generations inherited their traditional art. The Bishnupriya Manipuri ethnic community women in Assam belong to a linguistic minority as well as an economically backward community. But womenfolk of this group of people are rich in art and culture. They have expertise in craft and handloom activities. Hence they could opt entrepreneurship to improve their economic condition and contribute towards their empowerment and sustainable development (Sinha, 2022). But presence of competitive market, capital shortage, and low-profit are the key factors for the decline of handloom weaving ventures this community in Bangladesh (Ahmed et al, 2020).

Women entrepreneurship in the handloom industry in Bishnupriya Manipur is associated with the changing social and political structures and the expansion of market on the supply side and the attributes of culture of weaving on the demand side (Kshetrimayum, 2016).

Research Questions:

1. To what extent the artisans are dependent on the handloom and handicraft sectors for their livelihood?
2. What kinds of support or interventions are provided by various government or non-government organizations to the handloom and handicraft artisans or industry for their development?

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY:

The main objectives of the study are:

1. To study the livelihood options for the major Bishnupriya Manipuri handicrafts of Assam, Tripura and Bangladesh.
2. To study the existing status of the handicrafts of the major tribes of Assam, Tripura, Manipur and Bangladesh.
3. To study the source of the raw materials and the extent of sustainability of the handicrafts based on these resources.

Methodology of the study:

The whole methodology and approach was adopted keeping in view the Bishnupriya Manipuri households involvement in producing Bishnupriya Manipuri handicrafts of different varieties and are covered in the light of the objectives envisaged for the study. The study is a qualitative type of study and information are collected from empirical evidences by the researchers.

Population of the study:

Artisans those are involved in Manipuri handloom and handicraft.

Sample of the study:

Bishnupriya Manipuri handloom and handicraft artisan's hailing from Assam, Tripura and Bangladesh.

Definition of the Key terms used in the study:

Handicraft of Bishnupriya Manipuri Community:

Handicrafts are mostly defined as "Items made by hand, often with the use of simple tools, and are generally artistic and/or traditional in nature. They are also objects of utility and objects of decoration." Handicrafts can be broadly classified in three categories

- a) Consumer goods. Artisan prepare such utilitarian goods for self-consumption or for exchange such baskets for keeping domestic articles, smoking pipes, footwear, combs, storing, wooden, handloom and stone plates for use, textile items like shawls, coats, jackets, bed sheet.
- b) Processing industries such as minor forest products for self-consumption and for exchange at weekly hut on barter age system or sell them for money to purchase other items for self-consumption
- c) Decorative items include jewelry, and ornaments, earrings, ankle bells, necklaces, head gears, head dresses, In addition other decorative items such as wall paintings, deities either wood or stone, artifacts. These handicrafts for decoration are for self-use or sell /exchange them in the weekly market for money

Livelihood practices of Bishnupriya Manipuris:

The Bishnupriya Manipuri economy is equally distinctive since it is closed and undifferentiated characterized by adoption of primitive technology in economic pursuits. The Bishnupriya Manipuri people earn in their livelihood by undertaking many occupations such as forestry, settled agriculture, and industrial labour, animal husbandry, fishing, traditional commerce of which household industry including handicrafts is of prime importance Bishnupriya Manipuri have been producing different handicrafts both utilitarian and decorative over centuries. Bishnupriya Manipuri economy in the earlier days was a barter system through

mutual help. Lending, if any, between different members of the community is also governed by customs and interest has not been applied. Thus self-sufficient economy of the Bishnupriya Manipuri does not have substantial surpluses to warrant establishment of regular markets nor knew their potentialities for their handicrafts. Slowly market economies began to appear around religious festivals and demands for new items started increasing. This leads to weekly markets. Traders or middle men came on the scene and slowly these Bishnupriya Manipuri artisans who display their skill, acquired through tradition, used to sell their products to these traders or middleman, unfortunately these artisans are being exploited and are paid paltry amounts. Even this system is getting eroded due to poor marketing facilities and is unable to with stand competition from manufacturing industries. Though Bishnupriya Manipuri economy is mostly depending upon farming, these Manipuri over generations inherited their traditional art. This art is still continuing despite all odds faced by these Bishnupriya Manipuri households.

Bishnupriya Manipuris of Assam:

Assam is one of the most beautiful states of India, having so many tribes and sub tribes thinly populated in the state each having its own handicrafts and produce exotic items of handloom, cane, wood carving and carpet making. Handicraft and handloom are important occupation next to agriculture in the economy of the state. These are part of the Bishnupriya Manipuri way of life. Most of them learn the art by tradition. The women folk throughout the state have an excellent sense of colour. The basic colors that dominate the weaver are black, yellow, dark, blue, green and scarlet. These are all put together in most fascinating combinations. Shawls, and jackets shoulder bags and coats all stand for perfection that Bishnupriya Manipuri artisans have attained in this art.

Research Discussion:

Bishnupriya Manipuri Handicraft as Livelihood option

The Bishnupriya Manipuri economy is also equally distinctive since it is closed and undifferentiated characterized by adoption of primitive technology in economic pursuits. The Bishnupriya Manipuri people earn in their livelihood by undertaking many occupations such as forestry and food gathering, shifting cultivation, settled agriculture, and industrial labour, animal husbandry, fishing, traditional commerce of which household industry including handicrafts is of prime importance. The women of Bishnupriya Manipuri knitting their different kinds of clothes at home as their requirement of family, and some are making these as profession for livelihood. They also made different kinds of costumes of Bishnupriya Manipuri dance costumes which have highly demand during the occasion of Raslila, Rakhraj and in marriages too. There is substantial gap in the level of development between the other backward classes and the rest of the population. The work force among the other backward classes constituted 100 percent of the total Bishnupriya Manipuri population. Among them about 55 percent of them are cultivators who are mostly marginal and small farmers. Handicrafts and handlooms are part of their activities but not their main occupation inherited from their forefathers.

A majority of the Bishnupriya Manipuri, irrespective of their occupation is living below the poverty line. Their poverty levels are reflected in their low levels of incomes and expenditures as well as their standard of living. Lack of basic facilities and infrastructure along with secluded life cut off from the rest of the country further characterize the Bishnupriya Manipuri life in the country.



Pic: A Bishnupriya Manipuri Housewife is preparing the threads before weaving.

HANDLOOM AND TEXTILES FIGURE AT A GLANCE, 2018-19 as per statistical handbook Assam 2019, Govt. of Assam^(WL6):

Handloom Training Centres (in nos) 102
 Handloom Training Centre (in nos) 1181
 Weavers Extension Service Unit (in nos.) 98
 Handloom Production (in Mtr.) 5160
 Handloom production centre (in nos) 20
 Weavers Extension Service Production (in Mtr.) 49339
 Weavers MUDRA Scheme (in nos) 540
 BlockLevel Cluster under NHDP (in nos) 52
 BlockLevel Cluster under CHCDS (in nos) 5

Of these only 2 handloom and handicraft training centres are available in Karimganj, 1 both in Hailakandi and Cachar of Assam and in these three districts only Bishnupriya Manipuri population are majorly found but due to their very less number they could not get access to these training centres also properly.

Bishnupriya Manipuri has been producing different handicrafts both utilitarian and decorative over centuries. Bishnupriya Manipuri economy in the earlier days was a barter system through mutual help. Lending, if any, between different members of the community is also governed by customs and interest has not been applied. Thus self-sufficient economy of the Bishnupriya Manipuri does not have substantial surpluses to warrant establishment of regular markets nor knew their potentialities for their handicrafts. Slowly market economies began to appear around religious festivals and demands for new items started increasing. This leads to weekly markets. Traders or middle men came on the scene and slowly these Bishnupriya Manipuri artisans who display their skill, acquired through tradition, used to sell their products to these traders or middleman, unfortunately these artisans are being exploited and are paid paltry amounts. Even this system is getting eroded due to poor marketing facilities and is unable to stand up to competition from modern manufacturing industries.

Studies have shown that there is continuous depletion of the artisan numbers over the time and, many of them have become a large body of landless agriculture labour. Their pride place intraditional craftsmanship which provided an outlet to the innate artistic talents by manifesting itself in full range of variegated shapes size and designs is at present in the state of total disarray. They gradually are moving towards extinction and the official help to market them is tardy.

In order to overcome the problems of unemployment and poverty and a higher incidence of migration of active population, the diversification of economy from subsistence to commercialized production of farm and non-farm products has been recognized among the most important alternative options and a necessary policy. But the scope for large scale diversification of economic activities is severely limited because of a number of factors.

- Bishnupriya Manipuri economy is predominantly agriculture. However, their land holdings are uneconomical and unproductive. They use traditional technologies for cultivation, watering, input and harvesting. Bishnupriya Manipuri do not want diversify their crops even though there is some scope due to inertia, lack of knowledge and input constraints.
- Migration: A significant proportion of households report about the migration of some members for livelihood especially male members due to job opportunities, poor recovery of harvests, poor economic condition of family members.
- Employment generation: Government has launched some poverty alleviation programmes which provided job opportunities in the rural areas. The wage employment programmes have been initiated in the Bishnupriya Manipuri concentrated areas to provide employment to Bishnupriya Manipuri households. However such programmes have not been effectively made a dent on rural poverty. This was due to lack of skills, educational and technical know-how.
- Non-farm sector: Bishnupriya Manipuri depend upon non-farm sector activities because of availability of raw material, skilled family manpower, market access, communication availability, lack of government support programmes. Bishnupriya Manipuri women contribution to non-farm sector is very significant. Problems in promoting non-farm activities are Lack of knowledge, Lack of proper marketing facility, Lack of finance, Raw material problem, Lack of demand, Lack of proper communication, Competition from organized sector, Lack of time, Lack of technology, Lack of common facility and Lack of training.

Institutions involved for promotion of Manipuri Handicrafts

In order to provide and protect the artisans inherited skills, govt. both at the centre and states have set up Handicrafts emporium at important cities and at district level. These artisans are also encouraged by various government institutions to participate in national and International exhibition to show their skills. Various institutions involved for promotion of handicraft are given below.

States Handicrafts and Handlooms Development Corporation Ltd

Various states Handicrafts and Handlooms Development Corporation, a Government of India undertaking has endeavoured to carry forward rich heritage of all the respective states by reaching out the products developed by the artisan residing in these states and abroad through its network of emporia and a large

number of exhibitions, expositions and crafts fairs.

Khadi and Village Industry (KVIC)

KVIC works under the administrative control of the Ministry of Industry, Government of India under the department of Small-Scale Industries and Agro and Rural Industries. KVIC has a 10 member commission at the policy making level. The Commission consists of six zonal members (one of whom is Chairman), two expert members and two official members (the Chief Executive officer and the Financial Advisor to the Commission). The Chairman, CEO and FA are full time members.

The head-quarters of KVIC is in Bombay and it has its State and Regional Offices in all the States. It has training, production and Sales centres throughout the country. KVIC is having 30 State khadi and village industries board, over 3500 institutions and over 29000 co-operative societies. There are around 14200 sales outlets in the country in KVI Sector. It is having 46% women participation in its activities. 30% beneficiaries belong to OBC. KVI Boards assist over 1lakh artisans. It has reached 56 hundred villages. Some of the major functions of KVIC are:

- The KVIC is charged with the planning, promotion, organisation and implementation of programs for the development of Khadi and other village industries in the rural areas in coordination with other agencies engaged in rural development wherever necessary.
- Its functions also comprise building up of a reserve of raw materials and implements for supply to producers, creation of common service facilities for processing of raw materials as semi-finished goods and provisions of facilities for marketing of KVI products apart from organization of training of artisans engaged in these industries and encouragement of co-operative efforts amongst them. To promote the sale and marketing of khadi and/or products of village industries or handicrafts, the KVIC may forge linkages with established marketing agencies wherever feasible and necessary.
- The KVIC is also charged with the responsibility of encouraging and promoting research in the production techniques and equipment employed in the Khadi and Village Industries sector and providing facilities for the study of the problems relating to it, including the use of non-conventional energy and electric power with a view to increasing productivity, eliminating drudgery and otherwise enhancing their competitive capacity and arranging for dissemination of salient results obtained from such research.
- Further, the KVIC is entrusted with the task of providing financial assistance to institutions and individuals for development and operation of Khadi and village industries and guiding them through supply of designs, prototypes and other technical information.
- In implementing KVI activities, the KVIC may take such steps as to ensure genuineness of the products and to set standards of quality and ensure that the products of Khadi and village industries do conform to the standards.
- The KVIC may also undertake directly or through other agencies studies concerning the problems of Khadi and/or village industries besides research or establishing pilot projects for the development of Khadi and village industries.
- The KVIC is authorized to establish and maintain separate organizations for the purpose of carrying out any or all of the above matters besides carrying out any other matters incidental to its activities.

Non-Government Organizations

Various non-government organizations organize capacity building cum training programme at their respective clusters in their states. During the field visits, it has been observed that non-government organizations are getting support from Development Commissioner (Handicrafts), NEDFI and various other government departments for promotion of Bishnupriya Manipuri handicraft.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations:

To sum up, the weaknesses of handicrafts industry rest upon being unorganized with dispersed production bases, lack of working capital at producer's end, diversity of input needs making co-operative difficult, market intelligence and perception and the attitudes that craft is mainly decorative and non-essential. The challenges and threats to the craft and craftsmen are from growing competition in export market in view of WTO, continued low return weaning craftsman away from their traditional occupation, scarcity of raw material due to depletion and non-presentation of natural mediums and competition from machine made goods.

Analyzing the status position of crafts person in the present scenario, a crafts person represents the profile of a person with great skill, creativity and capability for self-employment, but lacking in finance, and unsure of the market and constantly at the mercy of intermediaries who have access to both finance and market. Therefore from the planning point of view, it shows that Manipuri handicrafts sector is full of possibilities for employment and export, but highly unorganized. The approach to planning must be aimed at sustaining the strength and rising to opportunities, and removing the weakness may be converting them to strength and coping with the threats. Also, in the light of the "Make in India" initiative launched on 25 September 2014 by the Government of India, it is imperative to give greater impetus to the handloom sector with new business models that will not only rejuvenate and improve the rural economy but also empower the rural lives,

especially the womenfolk.

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