

Growth and Development: Woven in Threads of Northeast

JV Manisha Bajaj

The textile industry is one of the oldest in India and is intrinsically linked to a range of traditions and cultures that is a reflection of the diversity that prevails in our country. The industry has a range of segments under its umbrella – hand-woven, an unorganized segment on one end, to capital-intensive on the other. One of India's biggest strengths lies in it being the largest producer of jute and cotton and the second largest producer of silk globally.

By value, the textile industry accounts for 7 per cent of India's industrial, 2 per cent of GDP and 15 per cent of the country's export earnings. India exported \$ 39.2 billion worth of textiles in the 2017-18 fiscal year.

In terms of global ranking, India is ranked 2nd in textile export. European

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The author is lead anchor and news reader in Doordarshan with over 3 decades of experience in the creative medium. She has written many articles in leading magazines and newspapers on multiple social issues like elder care, women empowerment, inter-caste marriage, girl child, Indian culture, north-east heritage etc. She has written books on social issues and women emotions. She has already done some work on the North East region like traditional games of the region, temple heritage "Rediscovering Hinduism" and "Ek Safar Ek Dastan" etc.



Union is the largest market for Indian textile and apparel products followed by the USA. In 2016-17, the share of exports to EU was 25 per cent whereas that to the USA was 21 per cent.

Among all these numbers one can spot another interesting data point, that the strength of India's textiles industry lies both in the hand woven sector as well as mill sector. Traditional sectors like handloom, handicrafts and small scale play a big role in the growth of the textile industry. In fact, the handicraft sector of India is one of the largest employment generators with a significant share in India's exports.

Some of the important pointers of Indian textile industry are as follows:

- India covers 61 percent of the international textile market
- India is the largest producer of jute in the world
- India is known to be the third largest manufacturer of cotton across the globe
- India holds around 25 percent share in the cotton yarn industry across the globe
- India contributes to around 12 percent of the world's production of cotton yarn and textiles
- India is the second largest producer of silk in the world, producing around 18 per cent of the world's total silk

In short, India is the second largest producer of fibre in the world. If we look closely, we will find that North-east is one of the biggest contributors to the growth of the textile industry.

But the next question that comes to mind is what the states have to offer in terms of textiles and what significant contribution can they make to the textile industry.

North-east India occupies a unique and important place in the indigenous textile culture of India. The people of the hilly areas and the valley areas of North-east India display heterogeneity in terms of varied eco-cultural and ethno-linguistic characteristics though all of them generally belong to the same Mongoloid ethnic group. However, each ethnic group has its own distinct, dynamic set of traditions, mythology, history and social structure. Textiles and dresses are probably dominantly identifiable cultural aspects which show the resemblances as well as the differences among the ethnic groups that are produced and used by them.

The traditional dress of an ethnic group plays a major role in showcasing the ethnic identity. Each ethnic group has its own designs and colour combination. Different motifs and designs of textiles have relationship with the rituals and religious life of the people of North-east India. The method of weaving also varies according to region and ethnic groups. The materials used for textiles has a

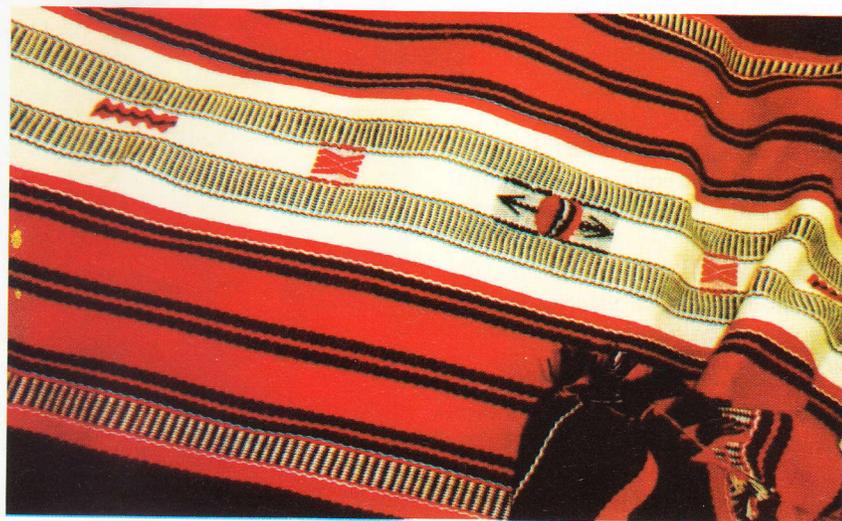
To understand the craft traditions of north-eastern India, one must know the terrain, its people and their way of life. In this area, as is in most other parts of India, crafts are not practiced as a hobby, nor are they a commercial venture; they are very much an integral part of the life and customs of the people. There are multiple traditional crafts prevalent in the region which are governed by the local conditions.

varied range - cotton, wool, Eri, Muga and orchid skin, animal hair are used by different ethnic groups.

There are 23.77 lakh handlooms in the country of which 16.47 lakh handlooms (69.28 per cent) are in the North East region as per the handloom census of 2009-10. In fact, handicraft and textiles is among the key 'watch sectors' of North-east and development and modernization of the textile sector in the North Eastern states is being given the highest priority.

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at home and decorated with embroidery. The striking feature of Tripura handlooms is the vertical and horizontal stripes with scattered embroidery in different colours.

It is the women who are the real clothiers of this north-eastern region. Whether it be the Monpas and Sherdukpens of Kameng, the Mishmis and Khamtis of Lohit or the wives of the Wanchoo chieftains of Tirap in Arunachal Pradesh, or any of the Naga tribes, or even the Assamese in the plains, it is the women who weave unlike the rest of India, where men predominate the weaving profession.

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A common factor that binds all the states is –

Weaving - It is practiced alike by all tribal groups in Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and in the valley of Assam. There are only a few exceptions, such as the Nokteys of Tirap in Arunachal Pradesh and the Khasis of Meghalaya who do not weave.

Meghalaya is known for establishing tradition of high quality weaving. Arunachal Pradesh weaves are famous for their beautiful colour combinations. Exceptional are the Sherdukpen shawls, Apatani jackets and scarves, Adi skirts, jackets and bags, Mishmi shawls, blouses and jackets and Wancho bags and loin cloths.

Naga shawls, also known as the angami naga, are famous for their bright colours and bold embroidery of animal motifs. Dress material generally depict ancient Naga tales. The handlooms of the numerous tribes of Nagaland showcase traditional patterns and the rich, vibrant colours have successfully fused with modern garments.

Traditionally, every household in Tripura had a handloom and locals rarely ever purchased cloth from the market. Each cloth was lovingly woven

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Silk – Northeast India has the potential to produce the country's finest silk products, the same of which can be exported outside the country, elevating the economic standard and status of the Northeastern states besides putting Northeast onto the cultural map of the world. Assam is the 3rd largest producer of silk in the country and leading among the north-east states. On the other hand, Manipur produces almost 100 per cent of the country's Oak tussar silk and is the highest producer of Mulberry silk among the North east

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states. Whereas, Tripura focuses on production of only Mulberry silk with end to end solutions.

“Assamese women weave fairy tales in their clothes,” so said Gandhi. Known for its exquisite silk, Assam is home to various types of silk, of which Muga is the most coveted and exclusive. In days gone by, weaving was one of the primary qualifications required for women to marry. To date, weaving is linked very intimately with the day to day life of Assamese tribes and the silk woven by various tribes, are valued highly nationally as well as internationally.

Bamboo and Cane Craft – This is another traditional art form which runs through various states of the region. Due to the weather conditions





of the region, it creates a conducive environment for the growth of bamboo. Mizos (people from Mizoram) take great pride in their cane and bamboo work. Expert basket makers, they etch and notch designs into soft cane fibers and use the baskets for numerous purposes.

Over 16 tribes live in the state of Nagaland. Most are adept at wood, metal and bamboo handicrafts. The women of Nagaland also make gorgeous, colourful ornaments from bamboo and cane decorated with beads, shells and feathers.

An Assamese life revolves around cane and bamboo goods. Since both bamboo and cane are grown in abundance here, most household articles, accessories and instruments are made of these materials. However, the jappi, a traditional sun shade, still remains the most significant bamboo article. The jappi shade was used to welcome the great Chinese traveller Hiuen Tsang who visited Assam around 642 AD.

Carpets - You can find the most ancient form of carpet weaving in Sikkim. The traditional pattern of weaving is done by the 'Bhutia' community which requires a frame and an exclusive manner of weaving. You can see the hard work put in by the locals in the intricate designs of the carpet. Arunachal too is well known for carpets. Arunachal Pradesh is divided into 3 major groups depending on their culture and handicrafts; the Buddhist tribes consist of the Sherdukpens and Monpas and also to some extent the

Khowa. The Aka and Mijis comprise another group, while the Membas, Khambas, Khamtis and Singphos comprise the last group. Each tribe has a unique culture and their handicrafts are great as souvenirs for those visiting Northeast India. When you see a bright colourful carpet with floral, geometric or dragon designs, chances are that the carpet is from Arunachal Pradesh. In recent years, these carpets have begun to be exported and are a major livelihood activity of the women.

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Wooden and Metal Products -

Known as a symbol of true art of India, Sikkim excels in wood carving. Sikkim brims with beautiful monasteries, heritage buildings and temples, the architecture of which is adorned with symbols and icons carved in wood. Not only that, you can see the special wood carving with papier-mâché in the mask dances of Sikkim. Pemayangtse Monastery is a fine illustration of carved wooden sculptures and wood carvings.

Wood carving is also associated with the culture and tradition of the various tribes in Arunachal Pradesh. Wood carving is a significant hobby of the Wanchos of Tirap. Their skilfully crafted and designed wooden articles have a special place in Arunachal handicrafts.

As far as skill of wood carving is concerned, some of the finest woodcarvers in India come from the Wancho, Konyak and Phom tribes in Nagaland. The icons that best define the Naga's skill in woodwork are carved mithun heads, hornbills, human figures, elephants, tigers and the log- drums or xylophones that are laboriously hollowed out of the trunks of big trees. Woodcarving is also associated with their religious beliefs. In fact, Naga arts and crafts-black smithy or metal craft is popularly found among the local tribes because of their affinity towards weapons such as spears and daos. The Rengma tribe is considered to be the best Naga black smith and you can get beautifully decorated spears as take-aways.

A variety of traditional utensils and fancy articles are manufactured in Assam. Gold, silver and copper too form a part of traditional metal craft of the state.

There are many more areas where the region offers great traditional articles and beautiful artifices like pottery, toy making, and traditional jewellery to name a few. Till a few

years ago much was not known about the various handicraft and textile treasures of the region.

In recent times, many young faces have emerged in the fashion industry showcasing the garments, weaving and patterns from the north east.

Earlier this year, during the Lakme Fashion week, models walked down the ramp in shades of ivory, a thin black strip stood out in their otherwise restrained ensembles — it had striking motifs of the Meitei tribe. It was Manipur-based designer Richana Khumanthem's ode to her land and its traditions.

"Indians are finally learning to be more inclusive," stated fashion commentator Prasad Bidapa. "The Northeast is a vibrant society that is very youthful and international in its thinking. Today, designers are leading from the front. Many models, too, come from the region. I hope to see more and more joining the industry."

Till two years ago, Atsu Sekhose from Nagaland was probably the only well-known designer from there. Now there are Jenjum Gadi from Arunachal Pradesh, Khumanthem from Manipur, Daniel Syiem from Meghalaya, Aratrik Dev Varman from Tripura and Karma Sonam from Sikkim. Their USP: use locally sourced, locally made textiles and promote such identities.

Some designers have also made a name internationally. One of the best known names from the North East to shake up the fashion world is Atsu Sekhose who celebrated the completion of a decade in the fashion industry with his Fall-Winter cocktail collection 2017. An Angami Naga, Sekhose attributes much of his design style to his roots in Nagaland, imbibing a modern adaptation of tribal patterns, colours and textiles from his native region.

Similarly, a native of Meghalaya, Stacey Pongener Syiem has created a niche for herself in the UK with

her urban tribal fashion brand Little Hill People. Her culturally infused, contemporary fashion wear, apparel and accessories are the epitome of innovative designs using traditional weaves and beads of the tribes of North East India.

The north-east region, by way of its location, enjoys key advantages as much as it throws up challenges for businesses.

The situation, however, has improved significantly in the last few years. There is increase in the share of industrial activity in all eight states in the region, with Meghalaya, Tripura, and Arunachal Pradesh recording the highest growth. Most development indices also show a positive performance in the region when compared to other states in India. This is just the beginning of the growth story and one can see that the textile industry will be acting as a pivot of this growth. □

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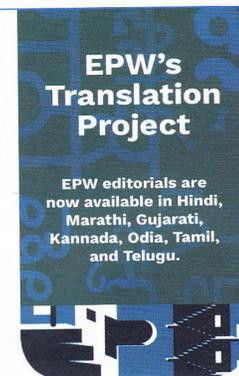
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