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Indigenous Knowledge and the Right to Work for Development— A Gendered Perspective

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The closeness between women and indigenous knowledge: A study report says “..... in Manipur we had entire range of textile technology and development process can be noticed very well since all stages of technology is visibly present. That is the reason the women of Manipur, irrespective of groups can give varieties of textile designs, what we have done so far was not a positive development but conveniently killed some aspects of scientific knowledge” (Ghosh and Ghosh, 1997). Ghosh and Ghosh (*ibid*, 121-152) had reached to such conclusion during the study on contribution of women of Manipur in sericulture. A detailed study is done on the life cycle of silk worms, production of cocoons, entire ecological background of silk production, and technological aspects of it. Now I am sharing one of my very thought provoking experience. I was working in an Assamese village in the district Kamrup, Assam. One morning in the kitchen of an Assamese family, I found that the aged father is taking full-grown dead silk worms from boiled cocoons and daughter at home is taking preparation for cooking of these worms. It was altogether a new sight for me. Further, to fulfill my enquiry they showed me the household kitchen garden where they cultivate these worms and cocoons for weaving. Lastly, she showed me *Mekhela Chaadar* (silk) and wrapper (*Endi Chaadar*), along with cotton made weaving products of towel (*Gamocha*), bed covers. I had seen varieties

of productions of home at that village as I was working on the project related to women. In addition, in this village for the first time I came to know one fact that even today weaving is considered as one of the important qualifications for women during marriage in rural Assam.

I experienced the same in the Bodo villages of Kokrajhar, Nalbari and Darrang districts of Assam where women were more involved in the production of cotton weaving and their wisdom to promote it through cooperative system. It will not be out of context to mention another cultural trait of weaving, which was followed during the Bodo movement. Precisely, this is related to that one cultural trait of weaving revived during the Bodo movement. In medieval period, the Bodo warriors used to put on a cotton waist belt, which was believed protect the person from any misfortune. This belt was a special one. The custom of making this belt was that the mother, wife, or sister of the warrior would weave the belt within a night so silently that nobody will know it. Any kind of deviation from this custom was considered as the misfortune for the person. This custom was revived during the Bodo movement in a new form when girls in villages weave *Aronai* for the underground activists not informing any body else and presented these cloths to the activists through some simple rituals at *Bathousal* (alter of village deity). Such incident proves the closeness of customs of weaving to the society.

In the Wancho village of Tirap district, Arunachal Pradesh, I had experienced deep knowledge of women on technology of weaving and different stages of development as well as their closeness with nature. The women in village could make their loin looms of different sises by themselves. Different parts of loin looms are made from bamboo and wood. I cannot forget one incidence of Longding, Tirap district of Arunachal Pradesh. I was requesting a Wancho woman to show the spindle in which she spins cotton to make yarn. At first, she was not comfortable as she was unable to show it to me. Because she wanted to show me, something, which is available in the market and more over any such instrument, was not there in her possession. However, due to my repeated requests she sat to make one such instrument for me. She collected one 10-12

inch long bamboo stick of quarter inch diameter, and an orange. She had fitted the orange nearer to the lower end of the stick, started spinning cotton, and had produced yarn. I was astonished seeing her knowledge because I myself understood the fact since I have studied science. Precisely, what I understood was she had made a balance between weight and motion to make instrument in action. Next morning she presented me one such instrument replacing the orange with an unknown round shaped hard-coated seed.

In the Wancho villages of Zedua and Senua, I saw age-old cloths of women are made of creepers' fibre, which is not used nowadays. During winter it is a common scene in these villages, where old ladies dried cotton seeds on the roof or extended platforms, which are collected by family members from cultivable fields. Similarly, you may see the Wancho women are making grass necklaces when they are working at cultivable lands. These grass necklaces really served purpose of beautification or was part of dress to cover upper body.

Quite important is the knowledge of making natural dyes. Almost every community of Arunachal Pradesh developed technologies to prepare natural dyes. Differences in colours are also noticed and may be for that reason these colours became identity markers for communities. Moreover, the strength of knowledge in it is shadowed.

Social History of Weaving and Women in North East India

Any ethnographic writings mention women as the main occupants of weaving (Ghosh and Ghosh, 1997; Roy, 1979; Dai, 2002; Elwin, 1975). In Manipur, "every woman is an artisan and every home is a production centre of handlooms" (Roy, 1979). Linguistically, at least, several thousand vocabularies can be coined on woven staffs, looms, and different parts of looms.

Roy (1979) has given local names of tools used in weaving in different communities in Manipur as summarised in Table 3.1.

This table is only introducing us with names of machines. Roy (*ibid*) describes the structures of these machines along

Table 3.1. Local Names of Tools

<i>Meitei</i>	<i>Local names of tools in different communities</i>						<i>English equivalent</i>
	<i>Kabuis</i>	<i>Hmars</i>	<i>Paitais</i>	<i>Kukis</i>	<i>Tangkhuls</i>		
<i>Kapteng</i>	-	Heraat	Helhot	Pathkuam	-		Ginning Machine
<i>Hutri</i>	-	Patsai	Patphel	Patsai	-		Grading Machine
<i>Maiyot</i>	Mui	Hmuithal	Muitung	Hmuthal	-		Spinning Machine
<i>Masha</i>	Jak	Sutham	Suttam	Patlam	-		Winding Machine
<i>Langtham</i>	Langtham	-	-	-	-		Twisting Machine
<i>Tareng</i>	Tareng	Hmui	Mui	Hmui	Tareng		Spinning Wheel

Source: Roy, 1979:18

with functions. She (*ibid*: 14) has documented procedures of making suitable yarns for weaving. These are Ginning, Grading, Spinning, Winding, Twisting, Dyeing, Sising, and Bleaching etc.

Most of the communities have their own customs, beliefs, and folklore related to weaving and origin of weaving. In these stories, women were the characters. The “Tangkhuls discourage their girls from marrying with men of village where weaving is not practiced” (Roy, 1979). The Wancho women prepares natural dye silently, because they believe that shades of manufactured colour will be improper if any body outside home knows, or see it. In Manipur societies, crafts are considered as sacred duty (Roy, 1979).

Weaving is not a class less occupation in every tribal society. In the Wancho community, weaving was a job for women of chiefs’ family and clans. Women of chiefs’ family and clans usually did not go to cultivable field like women of commoners’ clans. It does not mean that women of commoners’ clans did not know weaving. They learnt it in their childhood from senior women because women of chiefs’ clans were married to families of commoners’ clans. Therefore, in any case it was a known craft for women but was more practiced by the women of chiefs’ clans’ family background. There are restrictions in using of motifs. Shape, size of motifs differ from chiefs’ clans to commoners’ clans (Choudhury, 2002). The Naga shawl manifests social status. Not all members of the community are entitled to all designs. The beauties of motifs and colour combinations are not considered as art only. This may be the reason of non-availability of these products in markets earlier. Women as producer could not enjoy freedom in using their knowledge to earn surplus. Though Roy (*op. cit*: 22) mentions, “The greatest advantage of these (Back Strap or Loin Looms) is that an unlimited range of varieties of designs can be produced. It is possible not only to weave short-width, but also to get well-designed heavy and compact textured fabrics in these looms. These advantages are mainly responsible for continued existence of this crude and outmoded looms in the face of competitions with other hand looms” (Roy, *op.cit*).

Art or Technology: A Phase of Confusion

The art in weaving, attracted more attention of the western and Indian scholars, to write on this where the technological innovations within it remained as an ignored area. Elwin (1988) criticised such attitudes of explorers, who were dominated by their own thought process and distinguished the western scientific knowledge with indigenous knowledge system. Such attitudes caused a great harm to the body of scientific knowledge of non-European communities. It remained an unwritten body of knowledge. Lacking in systematic recording to describe what it is, how it does, how it does it, and different phases of development because peoples' knowledge is not static, rather it is the result of constant development and innovation reached it in the dwindling situation. Manchester politics of British on cotton production during nineteenth and twentieth century had killed the wisdom of family based weaving tradition. Ignorance of National Government detected homegrown weaving technology as subjects of arts, aesthetics, identity symbols, and cottage industry. The potentialities of women in hill areas who had primary technological knowledge on a production system and who were self-dependent in their weaving production technology could not be considered as very potential human resource for further prosperity and development of nation. Somehow, different programmes of small-scale industries, small-scale loan, welfare schemes, regenerated wisdom of rural women in transition. However, no steady links are established between big textile industries and the women who had knowledge of weaving of cotton, silk, fibre, *endi* garment materials, all types of cloths, necessary for furnishing, woolen cloths and carpets.

Small-scale Loans: A Few Case Studies

In the year 1993, February-March, when I enquired about welfare schemes on weaving in the Block Development Office of Demoria (Sonapur), District Kamrup, Assam, I came to know that women at village level are supplied yarns at subsidised rates. It was quite happy news and further inquiries revealed the fact that this facility is given to six women in a block, yearly. I hardly met any women who received this facility. Such situation needs no further comments. In one neighbouring

village of Demoria Block Office, I came across a few women who had received yarns from a Marwari Welfare Organisation, free of cost. They use these yarns for commercial production and half of the production is given to the previously mentioned welfare society in lieu of yarns. This society is a regular purchaser of weaving products of commercial value in the village. Whether it can be taken as an ideal policy to promote the income skill of women or as beneficial in the long run?

Kamal (2000) published an evaluation on the minor loans/small loans, an experience of Bangladesh. This is an outcome of a discussion on exchange of ideas, where they evaluated the existing problems and prospect of small-scale loans. This discussion is pivoted on three notions:

- (a) The small loan givers are the moneylenders of new generation
- (b) These moneylenders are strengthening the power of world capitalism.
- (c) They are local representative of capitalists.

Government of India has many such programmes like goatery, piggery, poultry, and giving loan to purchase rickshaws. I have hardly met any such beneficiaries in the field surveys in West Garo Hills villages of Meghalaya; villages in Dimoria Block, Kokrajhar, Nalbari, Darrang in Assam and villages in Tirap district, Arunachal Pradesh, who could achieve some prosperity from such programmes.

In Assam and in Arunachal Pradesh cooperatives of women weavers are many in number. However, success stories of such cooperatives are extremely meager. In Arunachal Pradesh, Training Centers for Technical Education is imparting training of weaving to women in rural areas in fly shuttle looms. Nevertheless, in reality, I observed that the waist looms/loin looms are much popular among the women than fly shuttle looms. In fact, waist looms are products of indigenous technology. Each aspect of it is a known area of knowledge for them. Fly shuttle looms are more productive, but not handy. Fly shuttle looms involve costs and are available in the market. In contrast, women use loin looms know the technology to make it and the raw materials of loin looms are available at home. Culturally loin looms are considered as women's

property. Daughters carry their loin looms with them when they go to husband's house after marriage. Such an integrated system based on innovative indigenous knowledge not yet attracted our technologists, who could invent a mechanised variety of the same model of loin loom for the growth in production.

Ajad (1999) observes that small-scale loans can achieve success at a low level. Beneficiaries of small-scale loans cannot survive in the more competitive market, because many a time they cannot sell their products in the proper cost locally. They cannot send their production at markets of distant places. Many a time, it is found that the receivers of small-scale loans are lending the money to poorer people rather investing it in any business and earn interests. As a result, an unproductive section of moneylenders emerges in the society.

Still we have to keep ideas of Kamal (*ibid*) and Ajad (*ibid*) at level of scrutiny. However, their experiences may be applied to judge situations here. Women are enthusiastic to establish cooperatives for women weavers, where they have to produce lists of members, to get it registered and get loans. For purchasing of yarns they have to face a costly market and they say that they do not get buyers at remote villages. More success could have created a situation, which attracts women to this indigenous knowledge system day by day.

Aesthetics and Commerce

Immense potential in these productions attracted attentions of fashions designers and business persons in recent years, who are more interested to sell aesthetics in it. They are using sentiments of buyers who are crazy for ethnic designs and handloom products. These designers many a times use tribal motifs according to their own imagination or add some new ideas in it which is nothing but a mixture or an improvising of ethnic designs, originally created by tribal women in different communities in North East India. Big textile firms and industries are potential buyers of such designs. These industries sanction projects to work on ethnic designs. Such activities easily will eliminate weavers from weaving technology, because the small cooperatives in any case would not be potential

competitors of big textile companies, who sell their products at international markets

Struggle to Defend Rights to Self-determination and Indigenous Women

I had visited government craft centre of Longding, Tirap district of Arunachal Pradesh on several occasions. This is a centre where trainees are trained in wood-carving and weaving. Trainer wood carvers are Wancho and it is traditional craft for them. The trainer in weaving is a man who received his Diploma from Bombay, and trained in fly shuttle loom. The women trainee attends classes are more or less exposed in weaving through loin looms before coming here. After completion of such training, very few of them purchase fly shuttle looms. The craft centre hardly has any other programme to maintain networks with these trainees. Besides, craft centre has a selling counter, where they sell products made by their trainees and the purchasers are people of locality, government employees and people like me who are very few in number. This centre could reach to larger market beyond their areas through district level and State level craft centre. The State's craft centre sells products of the different tribes from their only selling counter situated at the State capital at Itanagar. These crafts reach larger market only through a few National fairs, organised once or twice in a year. Just before attending any such National fairs, State's craft centre collects the best crafts from district level craft centers. From this example, one can understand well about the vast market where products of Arunachal Pradesh not yet reached within Nation. Such limited movement of industrial products can predict the longevity well. If not late, it calls for appropriate policies for weaving and weavers to ensure rights to the people to practice indigenous knowledge.

Post independent movements organised by several communities for political autonomy identified weaving products as symbols of heritage. The colourful woven products attracted many words of appreciation. All the communities in this region welcome their guests of honour. But does this heritage really haunt the mind of leaders of North East India to establish an institute related to weaving and textiles. Not a single faculty

is introduced in any University of North East India for advance growth of such knowledge system which has deep root in Assam, Manipur, Nagaland, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura and Meghalaya. None the social movements from district councils, autonomous councils to statehood considered it a potential resource in their region and put it in their agenda for development or at least in lists of demands. In post movement situation woven garments, being status symbol and identity symbol of Ministers and Government officials perhaps traveled far off places of the globe not as industrial products as woven by indigenous women.

Beijing Declaration of Indigenous Women

In the Fourth World Conference of Women, indigenous women drafted a proposal of demand where they demanded recognition and respect for their rights to their intellectual and cultural heritage and their rights to control the biological diversity in their territories. They appealed to TRIPS and GATT not to apply their own definitions to define indigenous peoples, communities and territories. World Trade Organisations must recognise their intellectual and cultural rights and asked safeguards from the domain of private intellectual rights and corporate monopolies. Through their demand when they wanted to protect right and respect for self determination , right to territories, bio-diversity to revitalise and rejuvenate their biological and cultural heritage and wanted to resume the positions of guardians and custodians of their knowledge and bio-diversity. It is not clear from this draft whether they have set forth an endangered perspective to establish their own right over production or not (from *Beijing Declaration of Indigenous Women*, 1995, 30 August – 8 September). If one, considers this proposal as more responsible step to establish rights to self-determination of indigenous people and compare it with the situation of third world, where women are fighting hand in hand with their male counterparts to establish their rights for political self-determination. Were they able to establish any right of indigenous women to practice their indigenous knowledge and technologies, for a better

future? Were they able to establish the rights of women to their production. Alternatively, it has remained an unsolved agenda of women.

Indigenous women are fighting for respect and recognition of indigenous knowledge in International Women Forums for their own people. And at home Indigenous Women Organisations in North East India and researchers and activists are trying to solve the problems of women in the inheritance of property of father and husband (Dai, 2000 ; Marak, 2000 ; Barooah, 2000; Haloi, 2000 ; Singh, 2000; Marak, 2000; Sharma Thakur, 2000; Devi, 2000; Khiangte, 2000; Mipun, 2000).

Now the question which comes in mind is whether the indigenous women, will be able to decide their priority between heritage and right over production and knowledge what they have created from time immemorial. Indeed this is a crucial moment for them when they have to establish their entitlement on the questions of empowerment (right over indigenous knowledge) and custodian of territories.

Summing up

Indigenous knowledge or knowledge of the people of third world has not yet received the status of right to work for the development. Modern India as welfare state has introduced many programmes to assure a better life to the people assuming that the scientific knowledge of the post renaissance Europe would be only weapon to address development. As a result the women's knowledge was not taken as one of the resource of human development? Concepts of indigenous knowledge system, sustainable development may have changed the direction to rethink some aspects related to development. But have such currents within the globalisation process been able to establish a knowledge system. We must agree to one aspect that the weaving technology, which is innovated and preserved for centuries by women and still surviving is not a heritage rather representative of an effective technology and as the knowledge of the collectivity.

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