

Handlooms in Bhutan

A camaraderie of weaving

Text & Photographs: Robin Smillie

For centuries women in Bhutan have been weaving handloom textiles for everything –from family clothing to saddle pads, reflecting their distinct identity in a rainbow of colours and patterns. In Bhutan most arts and crafts like woodcarving, paintings, carpentry, sculpture, etc. are mainly male dominated activities and these are executed in strict adherence to iconographic rules codified in the treatises.

The artist has very little composition freedom. However, weaving which is considered a woman's prerogative is not bound by such rules. The freedom to experiment with colours, designs and methods has provided women an outlet for their artistic skill, which has found expression in production of beautiful fabrics. Weaving for a Bhutanese woman is akin to meditation rather than a tedious activity.

With a rich legacy of weaving handed down from one generation to the other, weavers have been able to preserve the centuries old craft in its traditional form. Weaving activities also include dyeing. The dyes used are usually vegetable or mineral and are made by the weavers themselves. Like the weaving techniques, the recipes for extracting dyes from indigenous plants or stones are closely guarded family secrets revealed only to the members of the family.

A woman weaver's chores are intertwined with raising a family and farming. Her work place is either the front



Backstrap loom

porch of her house or the dedicated weaving room. Working on the household loom, she weaves different kinds of fabric. Each of these has a name which describes combination of yarn, colours and patterns. One such fabric is called hingtham translated as 'heartwoven'. According to the tradition of a weaver's family, it is either used for her family or for religious purposes such as making robes for clay statutes or wall hangings. Her ancestors would have woven the same patterns for her family and also for a lama.

But today, for augmenting the family income, she produces commercial tsongtham fabric which is sold directly or through cooperatives in the open market.

At present 240 weavers in Bumthang supplement their household income by selling the fabrics produced by them to Chhune - the tourist shops. The intricate weaving and elaborate motifs of the fabrics are highly valued by connoisseurs of textiles, the world over.

A seasoned weaver from the very look of the fabric would identify the district from where it came. Eastern Bhutan, the home of Bhutan's most celebrated weavers is the largest producer of handlooms. Several distinct patterns and designs have been evolved in this region. From Bumthang in Bhutan's central corridor come striped and plaid woollens known as yathra. Merak and Sakteng on the eastern border produce functional textiles like ropes and bags from Yak hair and blankets and clothing from sheep wool. Raw wild silk imported from the bordering Indian states is woven into fabrics with traditional intricate designs for jackets and kiras. Almost all patterns are woven by the brocade technique, in which yarn is picked up with hand tools that leave thick calluses on the weaver's fingers.





Handloom fabrics



Spinning wheels

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Though all the tourists admire Bhutanese textiles, there are a few who visit Bhutan only to have a first hand experience of the country's weaving culture. One such person is Kay Flynn, an accomplished textile designer from Bend, Oregon. An avid weaver herself, she is interested in the textiles of different parts of the world. In 2003, she spent two weeks in Bhutan visiting different weaving centres. One of the Queen's personal weavers taught her the indigenous weaving techniques. So impressed by the country's weaving traditions, she came to the conclusion



Dyeing processes



that the few ancient traditions that still exist on this planet might be better left intact.

"Weaving in the world outside Bhutan has gone very much high tech," said Kay. "While Bhutanese weavers use mainly backstrap looms and some floor looms with harnesses for simple patterning, the modern world of weaving uses 'compu-dobby' looms that interface with computers enabling the weavers to create patterns with the click of the mouse. These modern looms make the weavers faster at their craft, but they cause demise of culture by diluting the traditions that were built over centuries. If the Bhutanese modernise the looms, they will lose the tradition of friends and family sitting around gossiping, spinning, weaving and dyeing with the sounds of children playing nearby. I call it the camaraderie of weaving, the comfort of friendship produced by creating art together."

What Kay said is so true. If weavers in Bhutan take to modern looms, the world will lose the last vestige of a wonderful tradition. The people deserve the comforts of modernisation and winds of change are blowing in Bhutan. However, I sincerely hope that the Bhutanese weavers will maintain their textile heritage for the sake of future generations of Bhutanese women. Not for economic gain but for the 'camaraderie of weaving'. 🌄

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