

## **Weaving in Thenzawl : A case study**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Mizoram is one of the Seven Sister States in North Eastern India. It shares its border with Assam and Manipur in the north, and Tripura in the south. The state is known for its unique, distinct and colourful traditional textiles. Within the state, Thenzawl, a town which is 43 km away from Aizawl (the capital of Mizoram) is an important centre for traditional Mizo handloom industry. The town is commonly known as the 'handloom town'. Many of the women in this town are still engaged in weaving. Fly-shuttle loom is the kind of loom used here.

**Key Words :** Weaving, Thenzawl, fly-shuttle loom, traditional textiles, contemporary textiles

### **INTRODUCTION**

Textiles are a way of life and the non-verbal language of people. Fabrics speak to us at multiple levels. Its raw materials speak of the geo- climatic conditions and trade. The techniques speak of the level of civilization as well as links with others. The motif tells us of its legends, its myths, its beliefs and their way of life. Embroidery created by the women however is all this and yet more. It is an expression of the creativity of the women, who enrich their environment, their own lives and of the family by creating objects of everyday use at home. Embroidery is, generally viewed by people as a form of decoration or embellishment but its origins may lie in the decorative stitching together with woven cloth as well as in the strengthening of cloth, which always has been a very precious commodity. Textiles provide unique insights to any society, and they are particularly valuable in understanding traditional cultures.

Likewise, in earlier times Mizo women express their craftsmanship through the decorative weaving with the use of a loin loom or back strap loom, creating designs, patterns and motifs woven. *Puan* is the cloth, which is woven. '*Puan*' in Mizo language can mean any piece of cloth, and even when it is tied on the waist and worn as a lower garment, it is still called '*puan*'. A *puan* is normally about a yard in length and from 44 inches to 54 inches in breadth. The decorative weaving done on the surface of the cloth is known as *Zeh*. *Puan* were the only garments during the earlier periods, worn by both Mizo men and women.

Weaving is predominantly women's work and they are an excellent way of expressing woman's creativity. The women, therefore, are deeply honored for their skills. They kept these cloths and blankets as a treasure and when they got married, they took them along as they went to

their husband's home.

## METHODOLOGY

The review of literature was carried out to gather information about the history and the tradition, the technique used by referring to various published and unpublished works. These works are mostly collected from

- Private book collection and individual work
- The Aizawl State Library, Aizawl
- District Library, Aizawl

### Collection of primary data:

Semi-structured informal interview schedule was formulated for two different groups

- Handloom owners
- Weavers

The sample for the study was selected through purposive sampling technique. A sample size of 50 was selected, which includes 25 handloom owners and 25 weavers from Thenzawl.

### Tools and data collection:

Semi-structured informal schedule were formulated to find out the weaving technique and procedures of weaving in Thenzawl. Different interview schedules were constructed for handloom weavers and handloom owners. It contained both open ended and close ended questions. Interviews were carried out at their work places or residences. The interview schedule was conducted in the local language, Mizo.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Thenzawl is a town in Serchhip district in the Indian state of Mizoram. It is an important center for handloom industry in Mizoram. It has an average elevation of 783 meters (2568 feet). As of 2011 India census, Thenzawl had a population of 7,259 with an average literacy rate of 98.15%, higher than the state average of 91.33%.

### History:

As informed by the master crafts person from Thenzawl, weaving in Thenzawl had started in 1979. In the year 1978, Co-operative Society of Mizoram in collaboration with Khadi and Village Industry, Govt. of Mizoram set up Weaver's Service Center in Mizoram. The Co-operative Society's local board had set up a centre in Thenzawl. The first batch under the training course of Weaver's Service Centre in Thenzawl began in 1979. It was a one-year certificate course. The course included both theory and practical application and weaving was taught on fly-shuttle loom. The warping of the loom, denting, drafting, and weaving were taught to all the trainees. However, since most of the artisans wanted to start their own unit it was not possible for them to continue with the certificate course. Today, the weavers in Thenzawl acquired their skills from their mothers, elder siblings and friends.

All the artisans were Mizos and weaving was still being done by the women. The age of artisans ranged between 18-54 years. All the weavers were literate having their basic education. They were paid according to the number of *puans* they could weave and they did not have monthly

wages.

In Thenzawl, the handloom owners would set up their looms near the residences of the weavers for their convenience. This made it possible for the homemakers to manage with the household chores. There were no specific working hours. It was observed that in most cases, there was no separate industry for the handloom units. Looms were set up in and around the residences of the weavers.

#### **Yarns :**

According to the information received from the handloom owners and weavers, the used of locally grown cotton had been replaced totally by acrylic, wool, rayon and mulberry silk yarns. Acrylic yarns, locally referred to as Industry *lâ* (*Lâ* literally means yarn in the local language), were used for the warp, weft and patterning of the traditional *puans*. However, wool was also used for weaving the patterned stripes on some of the traditional *puans*. All the yarns were sourced from Assam and West Bengal. They were all synthetic dyed yarns and were available at Mizoram Apex Handloom and Handicraft Cooperative Society Ltd. (MACHO) shop in Aizawl and other local yarn shops. No dyeing was done in the units. Apart from these, silver and golden *zari* threads were also used on some of the traditional *puans*. These *zari* threads were sourced from Assam.

#### **Loom :**

The traditional back strap looms were no more used for weaving the traditional textiles. The Fly shuttle looms, locally referred to as Indian loom were use in Thenzawl (Figure 1). The loom had different parts like the warp beam, the shuttle, picker, picking arm, cloth beam roller, cloth beam, the treadle, the reed, heddle frame with harness, adjustable batten and a seat for the weaver. The loom frames were custom made out of locally available wood called *Char* (the name of a tree with showy reddish brown winged seeds). According to them, *Char* was used for making the loom frames because it was heavy and does not season. All the non - wooden parts of the loom were bought from MAHCO shops in Aizawl. MAHCO sourced these loom parts from the neighboring states and they were available for the local people to buy.

In Thenzawl, a minimum of 10 *puans* to a maximum of 40 *puans* were usually warped on one loom at a time. Although it was possible to warp yarns for more than 40 *puans* at a time, the beam of the loom became too heavy and as a result, the weaver could not weave smoothly. Apart from this, there could be problems in locking the loom when the beam became too heavy.



**Fig. 1 : Fly-shuttle loom**

**Preparation of the loom :**

As informed by the handloom owners, the dyed hank of yarns brought from the local market were first wined to a spool called bobbin (Fig. 2). Experts who was paid Rs.70 per 12 kg wound them with a revolving machine (12 kg of yarn was enough for 20 rounds on the warping drum). The bobbins were kept on the bobbin frame, which could hold 120 bobbins at a time (Fig. 3).



**Fig. 2 : Winding of bobbin**



**Fig. 3 : Bobbin frame**

These bobbins were unwound onto the warping drum by threading the yarn through a small heddle and reed kept between the bobbin frame and the warping drum. It was for the smooth winding of the warp. The circumference of the drum was 1.5 meters (Fig. 4). Trained experts carried out the warping and were paid Rs.1000 to 1200 per loom.

Once the winding was done on the drum, the warps were wound onto the warp beam by slewing the reed. The denting and drafting of the loom was carried out by trained experts who were paid Rs. 1000 to 1200 per loom. The warp beam and the harnesses were hung together and two experts carried out the threading of the heddles (Fig. 5). The two experts sat on either sides of the warp beam. Each warp was threaded through a narrow opening in one of the many strings called



**Fig. 4 : Warping drum**



**Fig. 5 : Threading of heddle**

heddle by following the draft plan. The expertises were paid Rs.400 per loom. After threading the heddles, they sleyed the reed again and then tied the warp to the loom. Once the warps were tied, the looms were ready for weaving.

The weft yarns were wound on the bobbin, which was mounted on the wooden shuttle after threading. The shuttle was thrown back and forth through the shed by pulling a rope that operated the movement of the shuttle across the warp.

### Designing and Weaving :

The handloom owners and weavers informed that the basic design of the traditional textiles had not changed much. However, changes had been made in the colors used, which was done according to the preferences of the handloom owners and the weavers. The handloom owners and at times, the weavers also initiated simplifications of traditional motifs. Weaving of the non-traditional textiles were also done according to the preferences of the costumers.

Plain weave and its variations were commonly used for weaving the traditional *puan*. Since most of the Lusei traditional *puans* had striped patterns, the stripes were woven in rib weave with wool. The patterning was in swivel weave (Fig. 6).



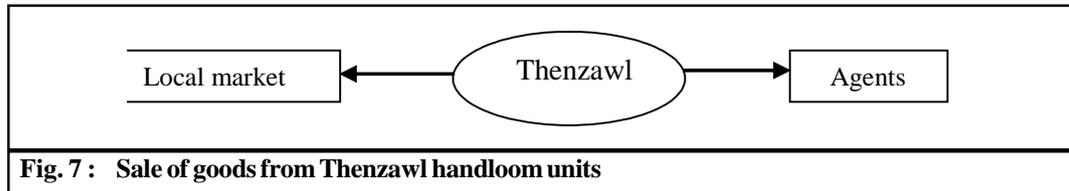
**Fig. 6 :** Weaving of *Puanchei*

In Thenzawl, *puans* were usually 45 inches to 47 inches wide and the length varied from 56 inches to 70 inches. The length of the *puan* were also customized according to one's body size. 58 inches to 60 inches was considered to be normal size and *puans* in bigger sizes (above 60 inches) were priced Rs.100 to 300 more.

### Marketing :

Thenzawl specializes in weaving traditional textiles like *puanchei*, *ngotekherh*, *pawndum* and *tawlhlohpuan*. According to the handloom owners, *puans* were sold out individually per piece. At times, few of the handloom units also wove non-traditional *puans*. The handloom units in Thenzawl focused on the local market and agents who sold them to at higher price in Aizawl and other towns

(Fig. 7). The weavers could not fully meet the demands of the market.



**Problems faced :**

As informed by the handloom owners and weavers, the major problems faced by them were as follows:

- One of the major problems faced by the handloom owners in Thenzawl was employee turnover. According to the information received, the handloom association of Thenzawl had tried to fix the amount of money paid to the weavers per textile. However, some handloom owners always tried to lure weavers working in other handloom units by paying more amounts. Due to this reason, the handloom owners were not able to retain weavers. This automatically led to a rise in price of *puans*
- Handloom owner could not get colored yarns of their own choice as they were sourced from Assam
- Due to the unavailability of good quality cotton yarn, they had to use only the yarns available *i.e.*, acrylic and rayon. These yarns were not suitable for hot regions, thus the *puans* were not saleable in many parts of the country

**Conclusion :**

Weaving still holds an integral part in the Mizo life. The handloom products were famous for the use of vibrant tribal color combinations which were very distinct from other traditional textiles of the country. Even though, many varieties were made on the traditional textiles, the demands for these textiles are ever increasing. Contemporized textiles which were fully patterned are in fashion in the market today. They are designed by copying motifs and patterns from other traditional textiles. *Puans* are also taken outside the state for exhibition cum sale.

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