

Research Paper



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NAGA INDIGENOUS DYEING AND RITUAL OBSERVANCE: A SOCIOLOGICAL OVERVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Dyeing is a process in which yarn or fabric is immersed in a solution produced by boiling up selected raw materials or dye stuff. The practice of dyeing came before spinning and weaving and was mostly used by primitive people to stain themselves or the skins they were wearing. Till the half of the 19th century natural dyes were the only source of colours used for dyeing clothes. Natural dyed fabrics were used as aesthetic value, symbolic power and therapeutic functions.

Nagas are indigenous tribals inhabiting in the state of Nagaland situated in the North Eastern corner of India since time memorial. They are Mongoloid stock and speak tibeto-Burman language. This Naga tribal is claimed to have spread across in many Indian states such as Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Manipur, even across international border such as Myanmar (Burma). The current paper attempts to understand the dyeing process among the Nagas of Nagaland and some sociological relevance. Every society has its own style and methods of dyeing colours and ritual observance so is with the Nagas. It is relevant to note here that Nagas have numerous attires both for men and women and are very colourful and eye catching. Moreover, these attires like shawls and waist warp (sarong) have significant sociological meanings. One of the chief reason leading to this paper is because the art of dyeing and ritual observances are fast disappearing from the Naga society on the one hand and on the other the traditional attires such as shawls and waist warp (sarong) made from handloom are fast diminishing its value in the face of machine made product which has higher quality and affordable price for every class of people. Colour dyeing are practise by using dried indigo leaves to produce blue and dark blue. Yellow colour was produced from the bark of a tree normally used by Angami and Rengma tribes. The earliest practiced of making red colour was out of animal blood mixed with salt and lemon juice in order to hold the colour. The Rengma also used the blossom of a tree locally called as nikhangi. The practise of colour dyeing is associated with ritual and social observance which Nagas called it as genna. One may say it is taboo to do some action while he/she is about to engage in dyeing. It must be mentioned here, unless such rituals observance and practices are recorded in time, such aspects of culture in the face of modernization and globalization where synthetic fibre flows abundantly, it will stand nowhere and would disappear from the people's mind.

KEY WORDS: Dyeing, colour, traditional attires, shawls, Naga, social observance, ritual.



INTRODUCTION

Dyeing is a process in which yarn or fabric is immersed in a solution produced by boiling up selected raw materials or dye stuff. The practice of dyeing came before spinning and weaving and was mostly used by primitive people to stain themselves or the skins they were wearing¹. Dyeing is an ancient art which predates written records. Till the half of the 19th century natural dyes were the only source of colours used for dyeing clothes. Natural dyed fabrics were used as aesthetic value, symbolic power and therapeutic functions. Natural dyes were practised almost in every part of the world. Natural dyes occupy an important place in human culture and dye yielding plants were probably discovered early through human curiosity, use, reuse and trials². In earlier days dyes were associated with different cultural practices and rituals especially among the primitive tribes.

The Egyptians, the Chinese, the Greeks, the Romans and many other cultures were well familiar with the art of dyeing. Greek mythology includes Arachne the goddess of spinning and weaving, the daughter of Idmon, the dyer in purple³. Historic classics of the Chinese mentioned the dyeing of silk in various colours as back as 2600 BC. The natural colours of the yarn in weaving are achieved through the traditional way of dyeing from natural materials including barks, leaves, flowers, fruit, roots, tubers, leaves by pounding and mixing and soaking the clothes. Each tribe have different methods to dye the clothes even if they used the same leaves and barks. Dyes are one of the most important uses of the plant, as it relates with cultural practices, rituals, arts, crafts, fabrics to satisfy personal embodiment. Dyes derived from natural material such as plant leaves, roots, barks, insect secretions and minerals were the only dyes available to mankind until the discovery of synthetic dyes. Before the discovery of synthetic dyes, Europeans dyeing technology was based on three primary colours. Blue was obtained from indigo; reds were obtained from the kermes insect, from the root of the madder plant, and from the so called brasil wood and yellow were extracted from weld Persian berries, saffron and dyers broom.

India is endowed with a wealth of natural flora and fauna, which provide the basic resources for a rainbow of natural dyes. Natural dyes are environmental friendly e.g. turmeric, the brightest of naturally occurring yellow dyes is a powerful antiseptic and revitalises the skin, while indigo yields a cooling sensation. The local

dyers of Arunachal Pradesh mix the natural dyes with animal residues and bovine urine which yields fast colour. Another process is the hides of buffalo, ox or yak is burnt and about 50 gm of the ash is mixed with the gall bladder of some locally available fish and then it is crushed with leaves of *Solanum indicum*. The mixture is thoroughly mixed in about 1 litre of water and boiled till it becomes thick. Then it is squeezed through a cloth to separate the liquid dye. The addition of few drops of bovine urine helps in quick drying of the dyed material⁴. Indian dyers used safflower yellow, bastard hemp, and various other native plants that imparted colour. Henna was used for colouring clothes orange, while red was obtained from madder and lac dye from insects. Indian yellow, which was produced till 1908 is claimed to have been originally manufactured in rural India from the urine of cattle fed only on mango leaves and water. The urine would be collected and dried, producing foul smelling hard dirty yellow balls of the raw pigment, called "purree"⁵ Mordant are substances which are used to fix a dye to the fibres. Traditionally mordents were found in nature. Wood ash or stale urine has been used as an alkali. Mordant and acids could be found in acidic fruits. Since ancient times in India, common substitutes for a selection of mordents are, like organic manure, cow dung or urine, curd water, ash of wood, salt, rock salt, lemon juice, lemon water are used. While on the other hand rituals are associated to a religious or solemn ceremony consisting of a series of actions performed according to a prescribed order. Whether primitive or modern society it has its own way of ritual observance. Ritual serves certain basic functions such as the provision of prescribed solutions to basic human psychological and social problems, as well as expressing the central values of a society. For B. Malinowski it was to address questions of individual psychological needs, whereas for A.R Radcliff Brown it looks for the function of the institution or custom in preserving or maintaining society as a whole. Even before the advent of Christianity Nagas were religious being this is true beyond any doubts because any task they undertakes first began with ritual observance. It must be noted, a miss performance of ritual would definitely end up in a malevolent result. Therefore utmost reverence and care are always bestowed when one performs a ritual.

RATIONALE OF THE PAPER

Nagas are indigenous tribals inhabiting in the state of Nagaland situated in the North Eastern corner of India since time memorial. They are Mongoloid stock and speak tibeto-Burman language. However, this naga

tribal is claimed to have spread across in many Indian states such as Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Manipur, even across international border such as Myanmar (Burma). However, the current paper attempts to understand the dyeing process among the Nagas of Nagaland and some sociological relevance. As stated above, every society has its own style and methods of dyeing colours and ritual observance so is with these tribals. It is essential to note here that these Nagas have numerous attires both for men and women and are very colourful and eye catching. Moreover, these attires like shawls and waist warp (sarong) have significant sociological meanings. What has mooted the present paper is due to the fact that the very art of dyeing and ritual observances are fast dying out from the Naga society on the one hand and on the other the traditional attires such as shawls and waist warp (sarong) made from handloom are fast diminishing its value in the face of machine made product which has higher quality and affordable price for every class of people. It must also be mentioned here, that unless such rituals observance and practices are recorded in time, such aspects of culture in the face of modernization and globalization where synthetic fibre flows abundantly, it will stand nowhere and would disappear from the people's mind.

MAJOR DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

Among the Ao Naga tribe salt and lemon juice are used as fixture to dye clothes. The earliest practiced of making red colour was out of animal blood mixed with salt and lemon juice. Whereas black colour was made of powdered charcoal mixed with salt and lemon juice⁶. The preparation of any colour is with salt and lemon which helps to retain the colour for longer life. Sonnie kath⁷, the proprietor of Exotic Echo, reveals how she uses natural dye in her weaving unit at Dimapur with the following procedure. First the yarn is soaked in cow dung for three to five days this act as a fixative. It is then washed with clean water and dried the yarn in the sun. The bark of the alter plant is used to get red colour. The leaves of indigo plant are also used for green colour and this can mix the colours for different durations to get various shades of colour. Once the dyed materials are dried properly in the sun, again it is boil and store in a big drum for the final dyeing of the hand spun cotton yarn. The dyed yarn is then woven into fabric on the loin loom and finishes into a world class organic, hand spun, naturally dyed home furnishing and other utility products. The entire process seems to be very simple when somebody narrates but a closer examination to

this action reveals the very fact that it has strict ritual observance. Today dyeing is a complex and specialised science. Nearly all dye stuffs are now produced from synthetic compound. With the coming of the colonial rule, chemical dyes are available in the market and it has indeed slowly changed the colours of the clothes from the natural dyes. But many practitioners of the craft of natural dyeing maintain that natural dyes have a far superior aesthetic quality which is much more pleasing to the eye.

Rituals are dependent upon some belief system for their complete meaning. Positive rituals are linked with consecrating or renewing an object or an individual, negative ritual are always in relation to positive rituals behaviour. Avoidance is a term that describes the negative⁸. Among the Nagas the term Genna is used which means to be avoided or forbidden during certain rituals. Like weaving and spinning the whole process of dyeing are carried by Naga women. Yarns are dyed before weaving into clothes. The dyeing process takes place after the yarn is transferred into skeins. Weavers use dyes made from roots, bark leaves and other vegetation. Dyeing often take months and the cotton yarns is dyed many times to get the right shades. It is said, the use of dye or any colour among the Naga tribal is often restricted till the harvest season gets over, simply because it was believed that such action would effect on the crop. The whole process of dyeing is carried out by women folk and they strictly follow certain restriction so that nothing misfortune will happen to them in this process. Both the cultivation of the indigo plant and the production of the blue dye are the exclusive occupation of women. For men, the indigo plant is a taboo, so much so that, they are not even allowed to touch it. It is a belief that if a man tries to dye even a small quantity of yarn he then loses his luck in hunting and fishing⁹. Superstition and belief also dictates the selection of colour. The red dye being symbolised of blood, therefore a young woman dyeing this colour was believed to die in a violent death or lose her head in a raid. Therefore, only old women or old widow dyed the red colour. It is said, among the Naga tribes, Lotha tribe would never make red dye. Indeed, they would buy it from the Ao tribe. Indeed, red colour signifies an important colour in Naga textile. Though it was not used so frequently like blue or black colour, as often considered danger too, but it was used in small part in all shawls with black, blue or white background. The colour red is associated with blood, fire and fertility and life force of many cultures throughout the world, the

colour red has always been extremely difficult to achieve and thus highly prized¹⁰.

One interesting superstitious belief among the Nagas is that pregnant women are taboo to dye colours else the foetus is affected by the colour. While many a time such beliefs really happened. Women in some tribes are required to practice abstinence, must not eat beef, dog's meat, mutton, dried fish and other pungent food, until dyeing is complete. During the dyeing process among the Ao tribe, no stranger was permitted to watch preparation process or else it was believed that the colour would not come as expected. More so, dyeing was mostly done by older women since it requires personal sanctity during the process of dyeing. It may be stated here a very common shawl called *Sürem* is a white shawl dyed in (*Mosak*) indigo. *Sürem* literally means (*Sü*)shawl (*Rem*) immersed. It is therefore a simple shawl of Ao tribe normally worn by common men and women¹¹.

Similar sociological observances are practiced around the world. So much like the Nagas, Among the Koreans only the widow prepares and sold the dye. However, in case a married woman prepares it a strict observance is followed according to their custom and tradition such as that she should occupy a separate room from her husband till it is entirely prepared. It is a belief among the Koreans, if a person die in the house or a corpse pass the door while being prepared, it will be useless as a dye¹². Much is said about dyeing colours and social observance related to it from an insider's experience. However, it is genuinely desired and valued the comments of outsiders. Therefore J.P Mills a British administrator and an anthropologist have this to say 'Blue and red are the only two colours the Ao Naga tribe knew the blue dye is obtained from the leaves of *Strobilanthes flaccidifolius* known as *Osak* in the local dialect. Among the Nagas the plants used primarily for dyeing blue or near black is often reported to be wild indigo species with botanical name, *strobilanthes, flacidifolius* and English name Chinese rain bell¹³. The leaves of the osak or indigo is pounded and spread in a mat to dry. After keeping for a month or two they are put into cold water and kept for three days. On the third day wood ash is stirred along with the thread to be dyed and kept overnight. If they are not satisfied with the colour they may soak it for another night. Finally again the yarn is boiled in water along with fresh indigo leaves. What Marion has commented about Aos is that "the red dye is obtained from the root of a creeper called aozü (c) or aowali (m). This is thoroughly dried and

pounded and mixed with the dried and pounded leaves of a tree called *Tangshi* and the outer layer of the husks of the acid berry of a tree known as tangmo(c) or tangba(m). water is added to this mixture and the thread or hair which is to be dyed is boiled in it for about half an hour. It is then taken out and dried and brushed clean"¹⁴The use of Yellow and Green colour is relatively much less among the Aos tribe compared to other tribes such as Rengmas and Angamis. The Rengma used the blossom of a tree locally called *Nikhangi* or *Atsonsu* which flowers during spring season. The yarns are soaked in cold water between layers of flowers. Angamis prepared it from the wood of a plant locally called '*Athuo*'. The wood portion of the plant is light yellow in natural colour. The bark of the plant is first removed with a dao; the wood is then sliced into chips, which are boiled in water with the thread. The thread is then taken out and kept in the sun for dry. One of the commonest methods of preparation of blue dye is to boil the leaves in water in a big pot, and then the cloth or thread to be dyed is dipped in it and boiled for nearly an hour. It is then taken out and dried in the sun. If the colour does not take properly, the same process is repeated twice or even three times¹⁵. Dyeing is also a representation of contemporary culture. Among the Chinese as early as Zhou Dynasty, social statuses were distinguished in colours of garment. During Han dynasty dyeing plants were more valuable than rice corn. Social demand for dyeing plants being so high, colours dyed by dyeing and printing craft of Han Dynasty began to differ in shades and dyeing and printing craft of that time became matured in this way. Colours were green, red, bright red, light red, yellow red, amethyst etc. In Qing dynasty, colours were used according to official status. For instance, the highest status would use bright red, blue cyan, bright yellow, glossy dark green, golden yellow, deep blue, gravel green, beige, gravel blue, cerulean etc. Official colours were bluish white, brown, deep cyan, bright yellow, jasper, golden yellow, cardinal etc. Colours were deliberately used to express status and symbolic meaning¹⁶.

According to Mr Impongsoted¹⁷, among the Chang Naga tribe, yellow colour is extracted by boiling the *Vailuh* (*Rubia silimensis*) whereas, black colour is also extracted by boiling the *Lahm* leaves. (*Flaco centus*) and black colour is also extracted from wild walnut (*Juglean regea*) which is called *Lakek* in Chang local dialect. Therefore each tribe has its own indigenous way of making colours among the Nagas and each of these tribes has their own social observance and significances.

The uses of organic dyeing have diminished over generations due to lack of documentation on the one hand and easy availability of cheap synthetic dyes with varieties of colours to choose on the other. Post independent period developments have brought many changes in the weaving traditions and technology thus at present women are to a great extent depending on market for raw material. However, one should not overlook the very fact that, encouragement from the local educated people and also due to the demand from tourist as well, some local entrepreneur have started with enterprises like Exotic Echo to keep the flame of traditional methods of dyeing burning. Needless to mention, such enterprises are flourishing profusely.

At a critical juncture of world environment today 'Greenpeace' have reported that the textile industry's impact on the environment in terms of water and land use, energy efficiency, waste production, chemical use, and greenhouse-gas emissions is alarming. Groups like Slow Colour are trying to tackle this problem, as their website explains. "Slow Colour rejuvenates centuries-old fabric dyeing techniques and hand looming traditions, protects the environment and creates fabrics that are healthy for life. Slow Colour connects artisan to audience, tradition to global market." And Peru is also home to the small-scale but powerful work being done by artisans like weavers in Chinchero, especially in terms of how their work supports and preserves the biodiversity of the region. Today a dyeing workshop run by the Centre for Traditional Textiles of Cusco (CTTC), a group that supports and promotes traditional weaving and spinning has drawn more than 100 people to the area to master the centuries-old traditional technique of making naturally dyed wool. Participants tend the vats of boiling water and work with the dyestuff, which includes chillca flowers from the nearby mountains, used to produce the colour green; shapy, a vine that makes the colour pink, collected from the jungle beyond the neighbouring community of Accha Alta; and the insect cochineal, which feeds on cactus and is ground to make the colour red¹⁸. All these speak volumes about the need for revival of the indigenous methods of colour making since it is environment friendly. Though one cannot summarily reject textiles made by machine because of the very fact that it is lighter, cheaper and of course better finishing. But one also should realise that the more textiles industries, more bales of cottons are used for synthetic dyeing. Due to this natural dyeing and cottage industries both in the rural and urban areas are disappearing.

With the coming of the colonial rule, chemical dyes was available in the market and it has slowly changed the colour spectrum of locally woven textiles; soon pre-dyed yarns followed which were of a differently fibre than the locally spun ones¹⁹.

Taking into consideration of the growing unemployment situation in the state the Nagaland Government department of Industry takes initiative by giving training in power loom and hand looms to young girls with monthly stipend. It may be noted, the traditional method of back strap loom is very much a multipurpose tool since the other commercial looms are designed only for certain weaves only. Sonnie kath²⁰ in this regards opined that the fly shuttle or shuttle looms are alien to our culture and blindly promoting them will not serve any purpose especially for who are engaged in the back strap loom. Therefore the indigenous loin loom/back strap loom should be given more importance and even in schools a subject should be taught as vocational subject instead of knitting in order to preserve our dying art and keep our tradition alive. We have to educate our people to promote and preserve indigenous textiles in today's world. Mostly tourists prefer to buy authentic traditional woven items instead of modern one.

Mahatma Gandhi was convinced that the revival of hand-spinning and hand-weaving would make the largest contribution to the economic and moral regeneration of India." The spinning wheel represents to me the hope of the masses. The masses lost their freedom, such as it was with the loss of the Charkha. The Charkha supplemented the agriculture of the villagers and gave it dignity. It was the friend and solace of the widow....Charkha included all the anterior and posterior industries-Ginning, carding, sizing, dyeing and weaving. These, in turn, kept the village carpenter and the blacksmith busy²¹. Organic dyeing not only helps preserve the traditional art of weaving and design, but also provides employment and yields economic and ecological benefits²² Unless it is documented now, the traditional method of weaving and natural dyeing methods, the extraction of sap and processing, all these vital information, indeed a culture of the tribal people, would soon disappear. The older generation who holds such traditional knowledge are fast exiting the screen while the new generation have no knowledge about its tradition, sociologically speaking such situation makes a society lose its culture, tradition and hence lost identity.

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