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Promoting traditional occupations in indigenous populations of Meghalaya, India

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Indigenous people have the right to own, use, develop and control the lands, territories and resources that they possess by reason of traditional ownership or other traditional occupation. A study was conducted in Meghalaya state on 2 traditional occupations, blacksmithy and manufacturing of bows and arrows. A representative sample of 15 families in blacksmithy and 10 families involved in the manufacture of bows and arrows were chosen. Observational and interview surveys were done by the first author through personal visits. The analysis of data shows many positive factors for promoting traditional occupations that are worth preserving such as creativity, traditional knowledge, uniqueness, identity, self-worth and contribution to the economic and social factors of the community. The agricultural implements are still traditional and perhaps can be improved to provide better mechanical advantage and higher incomes. Traditional occupations continue to play a major role in the social and economic lives of the people and must be encouraged to develop further to enhance rural economy and also capture the unique identity of the people. Educational institutions, NGOs, concerned government ministries and private organisations through social responsibilities schemes can help preserving and promoting this unique but rich and wonderful knowledge of the indigenous people.

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Understanding the livelihood systems of the indigenous people is necessary to promote their socio economic development and effective poverty reduction^{1,2}. Livelihoods can never be understood using any one-track logic be it economic, social, technical, cultural or political as they are made up of very diverse elements which, taken together, constitute the physical, economic, social and cultural universe wherein the families live^{3,4}. Livelihood systems, especially in rural populations in developing countries, are more than just a set of physio-economic preconditions for continued existence. It encompasses the psycho-social dimensions of the experience of living⁵ and takes a holistic consideration of things that the people might be vulnerable to assets and resources that help them thrive and survive, policies and institutions that impact their livelihoods, how these people respond to threats and opportunities and what sort of outcomes they aspire to⁶.

Since ancient times, rural India has been a predominantly agrarian society. Agriculture and allied activities support livelihoods of nearly 60% of the

people⁷. In recent years, land based livelihoods of small and marginal farmers are increasingly becoming unsustainable, since their land has not been able to support the family's food requirements and fodder for their cattle. As a result, rural households are forced to look at alternative means for supplementing their livelihoods. However, even these subsidiary occupations reflect the base of the socio-economic culture prevalent in the rural areas of the country. The main occupational types in Indian villages comprise of agriculture, fishing, weaving, cottage industry, handicrafts, basket weaving, pottery and shepherding of which, agriculture is the principal one. In order to support agricultural activities, many traditional occupations have been evolved such as carpentry, blacksmithy and various small, medium or large scale industries.

In the villages of hilly areas, such as in the northern and eastern India, the principal occupations include agriculture and gardening and they continue to be a major source of income.

Since much of Northeast India is a closed, non-diverse economy with low efficiency, perhaps, this

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may warrant major inputs in terms of connectivity, export opportunities, and a general change in the socio-cultural environment, requiring political will and modern administrative skills⁸. The question of why the ethnic groups of Northeast India continue to remain underdeveloped has been at the center of recent debates and requires much research.

Several theories linking economic development with entrepreneurship have been postulated and tested over the years⁴. Many such theories, such as the modernization theory, have been impractical and often destructive; one of the underlying assumptions of modernization is that traditional culture, social structures and differing languages are barriers to progress, as the following quotation illustrates: "Pre-existing social relation, family, kinship and community, constitute obstacles to business enterprises and achievement. Successful capitalism involves some rupturing of existing social relations and possibly the diminution of affective relations to leave more space to impersonal, calculating forms of social interaction believed to characterize the market economy"⁹.

Another theory related dependency to economic development, which was also faulty. Dependency theorists argue that poor countries have sometimes experienced economic growth with little or no economic development; for instance, in cases where they have functioned mainly as resource-providers to wealthy industrialised countries. There is an opposing argument, however, that growth causes development because some of the increase in income gets spent on human development such as education and health.

In this paper, the findings of a research project carried out in the rural areas of East Khasi Hills district among 2 traditional occupational groups are presented. These 2 occupations of the indigenous people are considered for the study because these are the very unique ones which are still practicing in the East Khasi Hills district compared to other traditional occupations like cane and bamboo occupations, pottery, etc, where these occupations are also existing in other tribes. Based on the findings, the potentials and perspectives for promoting traditional occupations in Northeast India are discussed and some recommendations are made.

Material and methods

This research focused on two traditional occupations practiced in Meghalaya: blacksmithy, which is an integral part of agriculture and manufacturing of bows and arrows, which is part of a

popular recreational activity. A stratified sampling is used to select blocks which have maximum numbers of blacksmithy and maximum number of bows and arrows manufacturers. It was also proposed to purposively choose villages where these traditional occupations are most popular. One of the villages where blacksmithy is actively practiced till today is Myllem and its surrounding areas which is 15 km from the main capital of the state, Shillong. Another village which is enthusiastically proficient in making bows and arrows till recently is Nongkynrih village which is 33 km from the state capital. In this study, making of arrows only is taken into consideration since bows are not manufactured as widely as compared to arrows. All the 15 families practicing blacksmithy and 10 families involved in the manufacture of bows and arrows were chosen. Although the sample size is small, as an ethnographic and indepth qualitative study, the findings reflect the reality of the respondents, which has reached the saturation point and the research obtained the views of the entire communities and hence valid.

An observational and interview survey was carried out by the author through personal visits, using a special proforma. The owner or proprietor was interviewed on the date of initiating this trade, products manufactured and marketed, number of assistants engaged and their wages, problems in procuring the raw materials and processing including availability of fuels and other supplies, prospects and support needed and incomes earned. The profile and findings are presented in the next section.

Findings

Of the 15 blacksmithy families, 5 were headed by a woman and of the 10 families involved in manufacturing bows and arrows, 5 were led by women. 30% of the owners were under 40 years of age, and only one above 60 years. None of the owners had any formal educational qualifications. Most of the industries have been in production for more than 2 decades.

Blacksmithy

The products of Blacksmithy are those commonly used in agriculture and domestic purposes, and are shown in Table 1.

The plough is used for agricultural purposes since agriculture is their main occupation. *Wait-lyngkut* is a wood-chopper which is quite heavy (approx 3-5 kg) is mostly used by the male to chop fire wood since the majority of the population in villages still use fire-

Items	Number of blacksmith	%
Plough	3	20.0
Plough & Wait-lyngkut	4	26.7
Wait-lyngkut& Wait-bnoh	6	40.0
Plough, Wait-lyngkut& Wait-bnoh	2	13.3
Total	15	100.0

woods for domestic purposes. *Wait-bnoh* is another kind of wood-chopper which is very handy compared to the previous one. It weighs just around 1-2 kg approx (Fig. 1).

About 20 items are produced each day in a blacksmithy usually, but increased according to demand even up to 40 items a day. All the blacksmiths get orders, about twice a week or whenever the producer goes to the market and are in contact with the retailers in the Shillong market (*Iewduh*). There is an increase in demand of the blacksmithy items and more than 80% of the sample responded that the sales per week are in the range of Rs. 26,000 to Rs. 28,000.

The raw materials needed by the producers are coal, charcoal, iron rod and wood. Coal and charcoal are used to heat the iron-rod till they are red-hot so that they can be easily shaped into the required design (Fig. 2). Wood is used to make handles for the items. Coal, charcoal and wood are easily available in the state and the best time to procure them is during winter when the weather is dry. They are usually obtained in huge quantities to be consumed for the whole year in order to avoid procurement in summer and monsoon time. However, the procurement of iron-rod is not as simple as the other items listed. Iron-rod comes from outside the state of Meghalaya and most frequently they are being procured from Kolkata. It comes in the form of a very long iron-rod (around 12 ft long approx).

A variety of tools (Fig. 3) are required by the blacksmiths and all of them use the same type. All these tools are made by themselves. *Ryngi* is the heavy iron-rod made in either a rounded or squared or rectangled shape which is use as support while pounding the items that the blacksmiths are going to produce. It can weigh more than 100 kg and hence is expensive. Hammers are also made of different sizes based upon the needs of the blacksmiths. *Nap* is just like a tong which can also be made easily by the blacksmiths. *Kynwo* is actually a fan which however, looks like a balloon and is use in order to pump air to



Fig. 1 — From left (Wait-lyngkut, wait-bnoh& plough)



Fig. 2 — The iron-rod burned till-red hot



Fig. 3 — Tools required

fuel the fire to the required temperature i.e, the more the air is pumped, the more the heat of the coal or charcoal be increased.

All the blacksmiths use their own land for their production and the work shed is very simple: open at all sides and the roof top is either covered with thatch or tin roof as shown in Fig. 4.

12 respondent (80%) said that the start-up investment is in the range of Rs. 50, 000 to Rs. 60, 000 which shows that the investment is quite high as compared to what we see in the pictures.



Fig. 4 — A tin-roof workshop. A thatch-roof workshop

The investments are mostly raised by the blacksmiths themselves as shown in Table 2.

Table 3 shows the maximum numbers of workers required in making the items, usually 7-8/ day at an average daily wage of Rs. 150-200.

Arrow making

The artisans of Nongkynrih village, Meghalaya have been involved in making bows and particularly arrows since their childhood. A variety of arrows are produced: *Nam Sum*, *Nam Siat Team*, *Nam Decoration*, *Nam Sport (National)*, *Nam Sport (Local)*. (Fig. 5) displays these arrows. *Nam* is a short form of saying *Khnam* in Khasi language which means ‘arrow’ in English. *Nam Sum* literally means the arrow which is used by throwing it like the javelin. *Nam Siat-Team* is an arrow which is used in a competition (sport- like competition) which is very prominent in Meghlaya. *Nam Decoration* as the word specifies, is used as decorations in functions and events. *Nam sport* (national) is another type of arrow which is used in sports nationally and *Nam Sport (local)* is used in local sports. The numbers of items manufactured by each artisan is shown in Table 4 Each manufacturer, on an average, can produce only 5-6 numbers of *Nam Sum* in one day, 50-55 numbers of *Nam Siat Team* and *Nam Decoration*, 40-50 numbers of *Nam sport* (National) and only 12-15 numbers of *Nam sport* (Local). Among all the arrows manufactured, *Nam Sum* is the most expensive and costs Rs. 10 each and the others are only Re.1 each. Manufacture of thearrows is based only on specific orders received, 4-5 times a year, which enable these craftsmen to produce the desired numbers and minimizes excess production. During the past 10 years, there seems to be an increase in the demand for arrows.

The raw materials needed by the producers are soft bamboo (*kdait*), eagles’ feather (*snerkbeit*), *rong pad* (a paper-like sheet), *bthing*, iron nip and kerosene. The soft-bamboos can be easily procured from the

Source of Financing	Number	%
Self	11	73.3
Self & DIC	1	6.7
Self, loan, DIC	1	6.7
Self & loans	2	13.3
Total	15	100.0

	Employment		
	Assistants	Employers	%
Max	7	14	93.3
	7-8	1	6.7
	Total	15	100.0
Daily	4-5	5	33.3
	6-7	9	60.0
	7-8	1	6.7
Wage/day	Total	15	100.0
	150-200	10	66.7
	160-180	4	26.6
	180-220	1	6.7
	Total	15	100.0

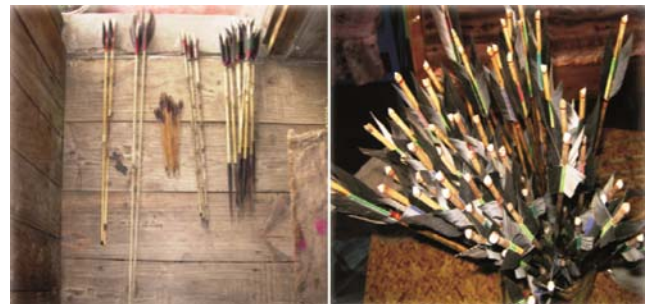


Fig. 5 — Different variety of arrows manufactured

nearby villages of the East Khasi hills district, Meghalaya. They are usually procured during the dry seasons, i.e., late autumn and winters in bulk to suffice the whole year. Another interesting raw material is the feathers. Eagles feather are preferred since they are rigid and sharp. They can also be procured locally. *Rong-pad* is a paper-like sheet used to tie and beautify the arrow. *Bthing* is used to sharpen and smoothen the thread while tying the feather on the arrow. Iron-nip is another material which is required to be fixed at the pointed front of the arrow. This is the major part of the arrow which proves its strength and sharpness. And finally, kerosene is also needed to straighten the arrows.

The basic tools that are required by the arrow producers are hammers and other simple tools which

Table 4 — Arrow making:- Items manufactured/day

Items	Nos. Manufactured/Day	Frequency	Percent
Nam Sum, Nam Siat Team, Nam Decoration, Nam Sport (National), Nam Sport (Local)	5-6, 50-55, 50-55, 40-50, 15-20	3	30
Nam Sum, Nam Siat Team, Nam Decoration, Nam Sport (National), Nam Sport (Local)	5-6, 50-55, 50-55, 50, 20	3	30
Nam Sum, Nam Siat Team, Nam Decoration, Nam Sport (National), Nam Sport (Local)	5-7, 50-55, 50-55, 50, 20-25	2	20
Nam Sum, Nam Siat Team, Nam Decoration, Nam Sport (National), Nam Sport (Local)	5, 50, 50-60, 50,10-12	1	10
Nam Sum, Nam Siat Team, Nam Decoration, Nam Sport (National), Nam Sport (Local)	5,50,50,50,15	1	10
Total		10	100.0

Table 5 — Employment of assistants and daily wages paid

Employment	Frequency	%
Max nos		
5	6	60
4	1	10
6	3	30
Total	10	100.0
Daily	Frequency	Percent
4	2	20
5	8	80
Total	10	100.0
Wage	Frequency	Percent
Contract basis	10	100.0
Total	10	100.0

are easily available within the state. Sixty percent of the respondents use their own land and hut for making arrows. About 20% use their own land and work within huts with concrete/tin-roofs. Ninety percent of the respondents stated that the start-up investment was in the range of Rs. 5,000 to Rs. 8,000 and for 10%, a start-up of Rs. 10, 000-15,000 was required. All the members of this sample indicated that they managed within their own means and none have taken any sort of help in the form of bank loans or schemes from any agencies or government.

The maximum number of assistants needed and the wages paid is presented in Table 5.

Thirty percent of the respondents require a maximum of 6 workers during the peak demand. Whereas, on a daily basis, 80% kept only 5 workers. The wage is usually paid as per the contract signed between two parties. Regarding assistance required in their production, there were no specific requests, but one person stated that it would be helpful to have a machine to make the iron tip, storage space for

bamboos during winter and some training centres. They welcomed government support to expand their work. Perseverance and hard work were considered essential in this trade.

Discussion

In an excellent review Das and Nag¹⁰ state that agricultural tools are as old as the Stone age which were required to increase the productivity of human workers. They further remark that all trades of village artisanship in black-smithy, carpentry, cobblery, pottery and other craft in bamboo, stone, etc. contributed to the design and development of agricultural tools through artisan's ingenuity and are relevant even today.

It appears from the analysis of data that several factors operate in Meghalaya to that promote or discourage the traditional occupations, Finance, specialized training opportunities and possibly a lack of successful entrepreneurial role models in village seem to be a few constraints. On the other hand, there are many overwhelming positive factors among both men and women, such as hard work, honesty, patience and innovativeness. Given the high literacy rates, higher educational levels and the potential availability of internet and other developments in technology and communications, there seems to be a great opportunity and potentials to significantly enhance the image, productivity and economic returns of the traditional occupations in Meghalaya state⁴.

In-depth interviews with the owners of these traditional industries revealed that there was a great demand for their products, which are met and sufficient incomes earned to pay the workers and also sustain their livelihoods. The agricultural implements are still traditional and perhaps can be improved to provide better mechanical advantage and higher

incomes, as done for rural transport in some parts of India¹¹. The Government of Meghalaya has encouraged and facilitated a number of small scale industries and offered financial support to many rural and urban employers¹³. However, there have been difficulties and delays in processing financial support requests and these has discouraged many tradesmen from seeking governmental and quasi-governmental support, and instead rely on their own meager resources⁴. Simplifying the bureaucratic procedures and reducing undue delays and providing suitable incentives will all go a long way to revitalize the traditional occupations in the state. Other measures that would help include physical exposure to successful small business ventures or agricultural firms, imparting basic business skills of account keeping, saving, and networking with markets outside the village, and creating awareness of the ways and means to avail low-cost financing.

Most of the owners of the traditional occupations (blacksmithy and bows and arrows) manufacturer, both men and women, are illiterate. Providing basic educational opportunities and relevant vocational training, especially to the family members of the owners will build their capacity to innovate, expand and seek better marketing opportunities, thereby contributing to the economy of the state.

The general decline in the fertility of lands in many villages has forced many villagers in some parts of India to give up their traditional occupation of agriculture or agriculture-based industries¹³. However, in Meghalaya state and the northeastern India, it was refreshing to see that indigenous populations are carrying out several traditional occupations for their livelihood. While these are not their main income earning occupations, many Indian villagers are dependent on these occupations to subsidize and also attract tourists and to enhance the economy of the state. The Government of India had launched the Rural Non-farming Sector Scheme (RNFS), which has tremendous potential of further enhancing traditional occupations and removing unemployment in villages^{14,15}. However, a recent review¹⁶ reported that the government has not been serious to address the basic problems plaguing this sector. Major bottlenecks in the holistic development of the RNFS include poor quality of employment and incomes, shortage of skilled manpower, unavailability of credit facilities, absence of marketing networks, poor transportation facilities, low public investment in villages, lack of basic amenities in rural areas, poor

law and order scenario, as well as erratic power supply. Besides, not much has been done to develop technologies relevant for the sector¹⁷. Thus, many entrepreneurs are by and large reluctant to invest in the rural non-farm sector. Also, not many NGOs and political groups are engaged in empowering the rural communities to be proactive and develop RNFS enterprises on their own. In this scenario, the Skill Development initiatives can help in capacity building by having workshops and also help the existing as well as the budding artists in funding so that they can expand their work in various areas.

For indigenous communities entrepreneurship combines elements of both the creation and sustaining power of small business with the desire for broader socio-economic development within the community. Here entrepreneurship can be more precisely conceived as a contribution to economy-building, Schumpeterian process. In fact, these debates about indigenous entrepreneurship and economic development provide the core argument as to why further investigation, research, and discussion are needed. Regardless, however, of the differences in historical backgrounds and cultural frameworks there is general agreement that economic development in these communities must be built upon promotion of entrepreneurial attitudes and appropriate career planning¹⁸.

Based on case studies¹⁹, Khasi women in Northeast India do not lack communication or ability to carry out their entrepreneurial tasks in trade, industry & contractual activities. Lack of education characterizes the lives of the manority of these women. But hard work & perseverance have helped many of them to overcome this hurdle to some extent. Likewise, there is a justification for developing rural entrepreneurship since three-fourth of the India's population is living in rural areas²⁰. Without going into semantics, rural entrepreneurship can simply be defined as entrepreneurship emerging in rural areas. Rural industries being labor intensive have high potential for income generation. Thus they serve as an antidote to the widespread problems of disguised unemployment or under employment in rural territory²¹.

The important role which rural industries can play in ameliorating the social-economic conditions of the rural areas has received emphasis in most of the major policy pronouncements on development in India¹³. Developing entrepreneurship especially rural entrepreneurship is very important but is not so easy, as it

is constrained with several problems^{20,22}. The general bottle-necks in the development of village industries are financial constraints, lack of technical know-how, lack of training and extension services, management problems, lack of quality control, high cost of production due to high input cost, lack of storage and warehousing facilities, obsolete and primitive technology and lack of promotional strategy as seen from this research also and commented by the respondents for future action.

Conclusions

The main conclusions from this research in the East Khasi hills district of Meghalaya highlights the major role that traditional occupations continue to play in the social and economic lives of the people engaged in these trades. The industries are self-supported and work on demand-supply basis, with adequate incomes to have some net profits to sustain their livelihoods. The external threats to these occupations can be that these small artists cannot compete globally with the companies who are high-tech and highly sophisticated. There are limited markets for these products as they are mostly made for agricultural purposes in which only the farmers will be using these items. These traditional knowledge however can be retained by giving support to the poor artisans in various ways; be it financially or in increase in capacity building. Thus, there seems to be ample scope to modernize and expand these industries. Capacity building and financial incentives will open up wider perspectives for these traditional occupations in strengthening the motivation of the younger generation to sustain these industries. Thus, they must be encouraged and supported to develop further as they are highly relevant not only to the rural economy but capture spectacularly the unique identity of the people. Although the study is restricted to only one section of rural Meghalaya, the framework of analysis may be used in other ethnic groups with certain modification according to the context of the study and also the recommended suggestions may be equally useful to other ethnic groups in Northeast India.

Traditional occupations may not fully qualify as entrepreneurial activities and could be classified perhaps more correctly under small businesses. According to Schumpeter²³ and other authorities on entrepreneurship, innovation and risk taking are cardinal features in successful entrepreneurship, which are essential in every small business⁴. Thus, the distinction is often rather vague and one might pursue

a new paradigm of entrepreneurship in Meghalaya, where the emphasis is not just economic and innovative goals but developing more cohesive indigenous communities. As stated in the United Nation Declaration of Human Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), their claim to indigenous sovereignty is primarily founded upon the aspiration to preserve their inherited ways of life, change those traditions as *they* see necessary and to make their cultures flourish. This fundamental policy of UNDRIP is reflected in article 5, which states that 'indigenous peoples have the right to maintain and strengthen their distinct political, legal, economic, social and cultural institutions, while retaining their right to participate fully, *if they so choose*, in the political, economic, social and cultural life of the State'²⁴.

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