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Weaving Towards a Greener Future

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Abstract

Weaving is both a cottage-based and an eco-friendly industry. It provides gainful occupation along with promoting the unique weaving craft. The hallmark of this industry is the use of floor loom, the organic method adopted in the extraction of the yarn along with dyeing of the yarn which is in line with the core values of sustainability. It advocates the use of products as well as energy in a way that does not harm the environment. Weaving is an integral part of Meghalaya's rich cultural heritage. In Meghalaya, Ri- Bhoi District is the main region where Eri Weaving is an occupation. The skill has been handed down from generation and is undertaken by women. They engaged in every stage of the trade. Weaving as such symbolises significant cultural and social meaning. The paper will particularly discuss weaving of the ryndia (Eri Silk) highlighting the fact that the nuances involve promotes sustainability.

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Introduction

In the age of increased consumerism what has been forgotten is the need to adhere to the concept of sustainability in our day-to-day purchase. Bulk production of garments/ textiles, unconscious choice and consumption has popularized the fast fashion trend which has a detrimental effect on the planet.

As the global level, it is claimed that each production step in garment/textile industry has an adverse impact on the environment due to water, material, chemical and energy used. The garment/ textile industry is responsible for four to ten per cent of global greenhouse-gas emissions every year which is far greater than those from shipping and international air travel combined. ^[1] Further, according to the United Nation Environment Programme, the textile/garment industry is the second-biggest consumer of water which dries up water sources and pollutes rivers and streams. ^[2] Compounding the problem is that tons of garment waste is incinerated, and end up in landfills as the garment industry produces about tonnes of fibre every year and less than one per cent of the fibre is reused to make new clothes. ^[3]

Coming home in India the scene is uglier, with textile waste being the third largest source of municipal solid waste as one million tonnes of textile are thrown away every year. ^[4] To aggravate the situation is the fact that the consumers' appetite for updating trend is growing exponentially.

Besides the burden on the environment, the social cost cannot be ignored. Textile workers mostly woman is made to work in appalling conditions and are paid unfairly. They are exposed to chemicals posing serious health hazard to them as well as the consumers.

To address the negative environmental and social impact caused by fast fashion many advocate a shift to sustainable fashion. Sustainable fashion is an umbrella term for clothes/ garments that are created and consumed in a way that can be sustained while protecting both the environment, those producing the garments as well as the consumers. ^[5] As such a garment produce should adhere to certain standards which implies that materials used are non-harmful to both humans and the environment.

In an effort to foster sustainable fashion Meghalaya a state in North-East India has since time engaged in an ancient craft weaving which promote and adhere to sustainability. The indigenous weaver's tribes in Ri-Bhoi district of Meghalaya engages in weaving of the ryndia a unique local fabric commonly known as the Eri Silk. Ryndia is more than a fabric. It's an heirloom of pride made with knowledge and family secrets that are passed down for generations. The various processes involved in making the final fabric are in sync with the eco system. The main highlights:

- The Eri worms which produce the silk are known as Niang Ryndia (Silk Worm). The silk worms are reared in farms at appropriate temperature and humidity. They are fed castor or tapioca leaves which grow organically. The silk thread is then extracted from open –mouth end of the cocoon without harming or killing the silk worms which is done in contrast to conventional silk whereby cocoons are steamed, boiled or dried in the sun, killing the silk larvae inside. ^[6] According to People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, 3000 silk worms are killed to produce one pound of silk. Thus, the ryndia silk earns the reputation as Ahimsa Silk also known as peace silk. ^[7]
- A natural process of degumming is followed whereby locally available materials such as ash obtained from banana, wheat stalk, paddy straw and pieces of green papaya are commonly used as degumming chemicals instead of soda to remove fibroin and sericin that stick the filament together. ^[8]
- The spinning and reeling of the silk is done by local and organic materials. Reeling is a process wherein the free end of silk filaments of 5-10 cocoons are fixed on reeling appliances and twisted into a single thick thread. Unwinding of the silk thread from the cocoon is done by bamboo and wood. In the same line takli spinning is adopted which is process of making yarn from fibres. Spinning is also done on handlooms, fly shuttle looms. ^[9]
- Dying method adopted is 100% natural. Dyes made from vegetables, barks of trees, fruits, plant pigments, minerals are used to produce colours. The weavers of the village create dyes from iron ore, lac, onion skin, turmeric, tea leaves and mordant (dye fixative) from plants such as sohtung leaves, waitlam pyrthad to make the colours stick to the fabric. There is zero usage of chemicals. The fabric and materials are natural organic textiles enhancing the thermal properties of the ryndia to be cool when worn in summers and warm during use in low temperatures, perfectly adaptable to different climatic conditions. Further, the fabric has medicinal attribute and feels like second skin. ^[10]
- Traditional floor looms, frame looms and fly shutter loom are used to weave the silk into pieces of fabrics which are then fashioned into different garments. Soup nuts known as soh paira are used to wash the coloured fabric.
- Sustainability also involves social responsibility. Keeping this into perspective the weaving industry works on the principle of transparency whereby weavers are paid according to the work. It has brought about economic empowerment of the woman weavers enabling them to support their families and better their lives. In addition as the methods involved in weaving is eco-friendly there is minimal health hazard except for it being physical strenuous.

From a holistic approach, the entire process of weaving is environmentally friendly having lower impact on our planet. The whole cycle from silkworm stage to fibre is eco-friendly and sustainable too. What is needed is our encouragement in the journey of ryndia weaving its identity into mainstream fashion.

The need of the hour as consumers is to be mindful and conscious of our purchases by choosing to wear sustainable, eco-friendly and ethnically made wear which will bring about a remarkable difference to the planet and the people involved in the making of our clothes and goods.

Conclusion

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