

Marketing Of Handloom Products: A Case Study Of Thenzawl Cluster In Mizoram

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ABSTRACT

In India, the handloom enterprises are largely household-based and an important provider of rural non-farm employment. This paper is based on the mapping of Thenzawl, a village in Mizoram, which has developed as a handloom cluster. Most of the entrepreneurs in the cluster are tribal women who have chosen to be entrepreneurs in their own right, notwithstanding the number of looms owned by them. The paper has analyzed some important aspects of marketing of the micro artisan enterprises in terms of share of different products in total sales, channels of distribution, terms of payment for sales, sales promotion techniques, and extent of participation of sample enterprises in exhibitions and fairs. The researchers have offered suggestions for improving the marketing practices of the enterprises through cluster intervention initiatives to enable the cluster to sustain and grow.

Keywords : Thenzawl Cluster , Handlooms, Artifacts, Entrepreneurs, Artisans, North East India, Tribals

INTRODUCTION

Handlooms play a vital role in the Indian economy as it is the second largest provider of employment after agriculture and moreover, employs the most vulnerable sections of the society, viz; women, persons from Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Castes. It is an important provider of non- farm employment in the rural areas. Traditionally, the tribals in North East (NE) India followed weaving as a hereditary occupation. Weaving as an occupation was undertaken for domestic production only. According to the Handloom Census, 2010, 62 per cent of the looms in NE India are operated for domestic purposes only. The NE states of India have the largest concentration of handlooms in the country (more than 65 per cent of the total looms). Assam has the largest number of looms in the region, followed by Manipur, Tripura, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram. However, a large majority (more than 65 per cent) of the looms in the NE states are engaged in domestic production only. Mizoram has a handloom workforce of 43,528 persons working on 23,938 looms (NCAER, 2010). In the absence of large industries in Mizoram, micro artisan enterprises play a significant role in the economy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Marketing is crucial to the success of the handloom industry and several research works in this area are visible. Some significant literature based on case studies were reviewed; which emphasised the marketing initiatives and strategies of NGOs, cooperative societies and others, to enhance the markets and marketability of handloom products in India. Niranjana's study (2004) based on three regions of Andhra Pradesh, namely, coastal Andhra, Rayalseema and Telangana, contradicted the popular perceptions that handlooms catered to a niche market only, both overseas and in India; and that setting up of cooperatives was a panacea to tackle the problems of yarn, market access and employment of the handloom industry. It was further observed that on the one hand, the well functioning smaller cooperatives had suffered due to mergers with larger cooperatives, and on the other side, the apex body of weavers' cooperative societies had failed in their marketing strategies, which led to the collapse of many cooperatives and ultimately affected the common weavers in the state. The study suggested that several issues related to the handloom industry required mapping and analysis on the basis of field information.

Durai (2005) studied the functional problems faced by the handloom cooperative societies in Tamil Nadu and highlighted the importance of the handloom sector in the Indian economy.

Niranjana et al. (2006) attempted to highlight certain trends and processes that typify marketing of handlooms and

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offered insights into understanding marketing practices of artisanal production.

Kumar (2006) presented the case of Anokhi (a federation of craftsmen) in reviving Rajasthan block prints and changing the way in which these craft items were marketed while Aruna M. (2006) traced the case study of Urmul Trust in Bikaner, Rajasthan in making handloom weaving a major income generating activity by product innovation and diversification to cater to the demands of national and international markets.

Mathur (2006) cited the role of Rehwa Society in the phenomenal growth of Maheshwari handlooms in the Nimmar region of Madhya Pradesh. Modak (2006, 2007) traced the success of Fab India as a major player in the retail handloom sector in India and the reasons behind the success of Fab India.

Syamasundari and Niranjana (2006) found answers to the non market factors and conditions that influence marketing practices of the handloom industry. They also studied the production-related innovations undertaken by handloom firms and argued for a production paradigm that values growth along with equity.

Syamasundari (2007) contended that the handloom industry is far from being a 'sunset industry' and by building upon the strengths of the handloom industry such as product innovation, organizations involved in the marketing of handlooms can lead the industry into a bright future.

Kasturi (2006) explored the successful marketing strategies adopted by Developing Ecological Sustainable Industry (DESI) trust in creating a brand identity for handloom products in Karnataka.

Gopiseti and Venkateshwarlu (2008) analyzed certain marketing aspects such as the production method, branding and packaging of several products, including handloom saris by SHGs in Nellore, Kurnool and Nalgonda districts in Andhra Pradesh. Sarala and Aravinda (2010) referred to the marketing problems faced by sericulture industry in Shivamogga district in Karnataka. Rajasekar and Gurusamy (2010) traced the success of handloom exports from Karur (Tamil Nadu) from a modest 15 exporters in 1975 to more than 1000 exporters presently, including leading chain stores like Wal-Mart, Target, IKEA, etc.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The present study conducted during the period from 2008- 2010 analyzed some important aspects of marketing of the sample enterprises in terms of share of different products in total sales, creation of designs, channels of distribution, terms of payment for sales, sales promotion techniques, market for the products and extent of participation of sample enterprises in exhibitions and fairs. Further, the researchers have offered suggestions for the improvement of the marketing practices of the enterprises through cluster intervention initiatives to enable the Thenzawl cluster to sustain and grow.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The Thenzawl cluster, located in Serchhip district of Mizoram, has about 200 micro handloom enterprises operating on the basis of sole proprietorship, and the present study is based on primary data collected through field research by administering a structured questionnaire on a sample of about 50 per cent of the entrepreneurs (97) based on random sampling method during December 2008 - March 2009. An attempt was made to cover the sample entrepreneurs or enterprises belonging to all the 11 localities in Thenzawl, namely, Bazar Veng, Vengtlang, Lural, Venghlai, Vengchak, Dinthar Veng, Lungrang, Venglun, Model Veng, Field Veng, and Vety Veng. For the purpose of the present study, an entrepreneur is defined as one who is weaving or managing the weaving activities for commercial purposes and also owns a loom or looms.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

❖ **Handloom Products of Thenzawl - A Rich Tradition:** At the outset, it would be interesting to have a glimpse of the various products manufactured in Thenzawl and their socio - cultural connotations. Mizoram offers a rich and varied ethnic range of intricately woven handloom products. The '*puan*' is the most widely worn ethnic dress in Mizoram. In fact, the word '*Puantah*' which means 'weaving' in Mizo language has sprung from the word *puan*. The *puan*, worn by women, is akin to the lungi, usually about 45 to 48 inches in width and about 36 inches in length.

There are *puans* for every occasion - festivals, weddings, dances and mourning with specific designs, colours and names. *Puanchei* is worn for weddings, *Ngotekherh* for festivals, and *Puandum* for mourning and so on. About 13 items of handloom products are produced in the Thenzawl cluster ranging from *puans* and shawls to bags and purses.

These different products and their socio - cultural connotations have been described and elaborated below:

❖ **Puanchei** is the most colourful dress (*puan*) worn by Mizo women. The *Puanchei* is worn on occasions of weddings and festivals such as *Chapchar kut*,¹ *Pawl kut*² and *Mim kut*³. This is a multi - coloured striped *puan* sometimes interlaced with *zari*. This is the traditional wedding dress worn by the Mizo brides. The colours used are red, green, pink, black and white.

❖ **Ngotekherh** is a *puan* for festive occasions. This is a traditional Mizo dress also worn for the traditional dances such as '*Cheraw*', the popular bamboo dance which displays a perfect synchrony of the movements of the footsteps of the Mizo girls to the beats of the bamboo. The *Ngotekherh* usually has white and black stripes, but nowadays, fresh combinations of colours like blue and red are being adopted by the weavers to cater to the preferences of the modern Mizo society.

❖ **Siniar** is a *puan* enriched by intricate embroidery and *zari* work by the weavers. It comes in varied designs and colours and does not subscribe to any traditional colours. *Siniar* is one of the most popular dresses worn by the Mizo women. It has been observed that in recent times, Mizo women in urban areas also wear *Siniars* to their workplace. It is symbolic of the modern Mizo women's sense of pride in the Mizo culture and tradition.

❖ **Kawrchei** is a black and white striped full sleeve blouse usually worn on *Puanchei* and *Ngotekherh* on festive occasions.

❖ **Tawlhloh puan** is an indigo coloured dress with red and white stripes. It was a traditional dress worn by warriors in ancient times. It symbolizes the tribal warriors' undying spirit for defeating the enemy in the battle ground.

❖ **Puandum** is usually woven in black, red, yellow and green stripes. *Puandum* traditionally had to be taken by every Mizo girl to her husband's home when she got married and it was used to cover her husband's body when he died. It is usually worn as a mark of respect to a dead person during mourning and condolence.

❖ **Puan ropui** is a niche product woven to cater to the needs of the modern Mizo women. It is richly embroidered with *zari* and intricate designs and motifs all over the *puan*. It is the richest and most highly priced *puan* produced in

Table 1: Share of Different Handloom Products In The Total Sales of Sample Enterprises For The Years 2006, 2007 and 2008			
Handloom products	Share in Total Sales (in per cent)		
	2006	2007	2008
1. Puanchei	53.15	52.87	52.99
2. Siniar puan	13.34	14.24	14.09
3. Tawlhloh puan	1.14	0.99	0.91
4. Ngotekherh	25.43	24.73	25.16
5. Puandum	1.76	1.72	1.67
6. Shawl	1.16	1.32	1.45
7. Purse	0.26	0.42	0.26
8. Plain puan	2.18	2.05	1.79
9. Puan-Ropui	0.75	0.69	0.64
10. Vest coat	0.35	0.49	0.57
11. Bags	0.13	0.16	0.19
12. Puantial	0.03	0.02	0.03
13. Kawrchei	0.31	0.29	0.25
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00
Source: Field survey			

Thenzawl.

❖ **Plain puan** is the *puan* commonly worn by Mizo women as a daily dress and the price is low.

❖ **Vest Coat** is a colourful jacket woven in ethnic Mizo designs worn by men and women.

Other items include bags, shawls and vest coats. Bags, purses and shawls with typical ethnic Mizo designs and colours are becoming popular in recent times. Weavers have gradually diversified into these products to cater to the increasing demand (Ramswamy and Kumar, 2010).

❖ **Share Of Different Products In The Total Sales Of Sample Enterprises:** The researchers have made an attempt to assess the share of different products manufactured by sample enterprises in the cluster in order to understand which products are significantly contributing to the total sales turnover of the cluster. The Table 1 shows the share of different products in the total sales turnover of the sample enterprises.

Responses	No. of Enterprises	Percent
The professional designer	-	-
The entrepreneurs	45	46.39
The weaver -labourers	41	42.27
The entrepreneur and the weaver jointly	9	9.28
The professional designer and the entrepreneur jointly	2	2.06
Total	97	100.00
Source: Field survey		

The following observations are made from the Table 1 :

❖ *Puanchei*, *Ngotekherh* and *Siniar puan* have been the most dominant products with a combined share of about 92 percent in the total sales turnover of sample enterprises in the cluster in the period between 2006 and 2008.

❖ *Puanchei* maintained the highest share of about 53 percent among all the products in the total sales of sample enterprises in the cluster in the years 2006, 2007 and 2008.

❖ *Ngotekherh* was the second most important product, having an average share of 25 per cent of the total sales turnover of sample enterprises for the years 2006, 2007 and 2008.

❖ *Siniar puan* was ranked third with a share of about 14 percent in the total sales turnover of the sample enterprises.

❖ The products recently introduced by the sample enterprises (in 2006) namely purse, vest coat and bag had a combined share of only 0.74 per cent in the total sales turnover of the sample enterprises.

❖ The other products maintained a low share in the total sales turnover of the sample enterprises in the cluster.

❖ The share of *Puan ropui* and plain *puan* marginally declined from 2006 to 2008.

❖ **Designs:** The study also enquired into the people involved in the creation of designs in the sample enterprises. The Table 2 gives the details about who creates the designs for the products in the sample enterprises.

Interestingly, no sample entrepreneur solely depended on any professional designer for the purpose of creating designs. However, two-sample entrepreneurs had consulted professional designers to create designs for their products, but the creation of designs was not solely assigned to professional designers. The entrepreneurs also participated in the decision-making process of creation of such designs. 46.39 per cent of the sample enterprises depended on their own entrepreneurs (who happen to be the weavers also) for the creation of designs. 42.27 per cent of the sample enterprises relied on the in-house weavers - labourers for this purpose. In the case of 9.28 per cent of the enterprises, the designs were decided jointly by the weaver-labourers and the entrepreneurs. As the products manufactured were traditional and followed traditional designs, it appears that the need to involve designers did not arise. The product differentiation is based on specific ethnic designs, patterns and colours and has specific socio - cultural connotations in the lifestyle of Mizos. For example, *Puanchei* has red, green, pink and green stripes, and *Ngotekherh* has black stripes. At the same

time, as the entrepreneurs and weavers were also well versed in the traditional Mizo designs, it appears that they did not require inputs in the creation of designs from professional consultants. 58.76 per cent of the sample entrepreneurs were in the habit of obtaining feedback from their customers on the designs of their products, and they made changes in the designs within two months of receiving such recommendations from the customers. However, there is a wide scope for innovation and some entrepreneurs made changes in the traditional colours used for traditional products such as *Ngotekherh*, which occupied the second largest share in the total production of sample enterprises. The traditional colours used in *Ngotekherh* were black stripes. The enterprises have introduced new colours in this product such as blue, brown and green to cater to the demands of the market.

❖ **Networking With Specialized Institutes:** The present study also enquired into whether the sample enterprises had any networking with specialized institutes such as National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT), Hyderabad and National Institute of Design (NID), Delhi. None of the entrepreneurs had any networking with the national level institutions such as NIFT and NID. Only one enterprise had some networking with Khadi and Village Industries Board (KVIB) and Mizoram Apex Handloom & Handicraft Cooperative Society Ltd. (MAHCO) in Aizawl.

❖ **Quality Control:** It is observed that most of the weavers were not aware of the need for any scientific quality control techniques and as a consequence, they did not apply any quality control measures for the handloom products manufactured by their enterprises. 89 per cent of the sample entrepreneurs did not respond to the question, and the remaining entrepreneurs said that they personally checked the texture of the product in a primitive way by feeling or touching it or sought the assistance (3.09 per cent) of the demonstrator in the Handloom Extension office, Office of the Directorate of Handlooms, Government of Mizoram in Thenzawl.

❖ **Testing Facilities:** The present study enquired into the testing facilities available in the Thenzawl handloom cluster. Testing of the fabric and yarn is required to ascertain whether the colours in the fabric are causing allergies to the human skin or has any other adverse effect; colour fastness of the fabric; strength of the fabric and so on. However, no laboratory exists in Mizoram that can undertake such testing activities. Moreover, the sample entrepreneurs in Thenzawl were largely unaware of the scientific techniques used for testing the yarn and fabric. There is an urgent need to educate the weavers about the need for testing and establishment of a laboratory in Thenzawl, which may have equipments for testing such as yarn strength tester, fabric strength tester, glass instruments and chemicals for testing, PH meter and so on.

❖ **Pricing :** The pricing of the three most important products having the highest share in the total production is presented in the following section to understand the expenses incurred in the course of manufacturing the final product and the margin of profit available to the entrepreneur.

❖ **Puanchei:** Cost of raw materials was ₹ 225, the cost of the labour was ₹ 350. The total cost of production amounted to ₹ 575. The price at which it was sold to the dealer was ₹ 700. The entrepreneur got a margin of ₹ 125 (about 22 per cent). The dealer got a margin of ₹ 100- ₹ 300 (about 23 per cent) .

❖ **Ngotekherh:** The cost of raw materials was ₹ 105; the cost of labour was ₹ 200. The total cost of production amounted to ₹ 305. The price at which it was sold to the dealer was ₹ 375. The entrepreneur earned a margin of ₹ 65

Channels	Responses
Direct Selling	40
Through one dealer	16
Through two dealers	9
Through government agency	10
Through private agency	60
Total	135
Note: Some respondents gave multiple responses	
Source: Field survey	

(about 22 per cent). The dealer got a margin of ₹ 75 (about 20 per cent).

❖ **Siniar**: The cost of raw materials was ₹ 210, the cost of labour was ₹ 500. The total cost of production amounted to ₹ 710. The price at which it was sold to the dealer was ₹ 850. The entrepreneur got a margin of ₹ 140 (about 20 per cent). The dealer got a margin of ₹ 350 (about 25 per cent).

❖ **Channel Management**

❖ **Channels of Distribution**: The main channels used for selling handloom products by the sample enterprises was direct selling, selling through one or two dealers, selling through Government agencies such as MAHCO and selling through private agents. Out of the 135 responses received, 60 affirmations were for selling through private agents and 40 affirmations were for direct selling (Table 3). There are several agents in Thenzawl who undertake selling of the handloom products for the enterprises.

Type of Sales Promotion	Percent	No. of Responses
Trade discount	54.37	56
Credit to traders	31.07	32
Customer discount	14.56	15
Total	100.00	103
Note: Some respondents gave multiple responses		
Source: Field survey		

❖ **Market Spread Of Sample Enterprises**: The study also examined the geographical spread of the market for the handloom products of the cluster. The study revealed that the market for the products was largely restricted to Mizoram. 92.54 per cent of the sample enterprises sold their products in Mizoram only ; 3.72 per cent of the sample enterprises sold their products in other states of NER, and a negligible percent (1.49 per cent) of the enterprises sold their products at the national level. Only one enterprise was able to sell its products in the international market.

This may be largely due to the locational disadvantage of the cluster, the lack of diversification of products and a lack of entrepreneurs' exposure to the national and international markets due to weak linkages and low participation of the enterprises at national and international trade fairs and exhibitions.

However, Das (2005) opined that the success of a cluster need not be measured by whether and to what extent its links with the international markets exist; instead, supportive interventions need to be made towards product diversification and upgrading local technological capabilities of these clusters.

❖ **Promotion**

❖ **Sales Promotion Techniques**: The study has attempted to identify the sales promotion techniques, if any, adopted by the sample. Out of a total of 103 responses given by the respondents, 54 per cent of the affirmations favoured trade discount, followed by credit to traders (32 affirmations). Only 15 percent of the affirmations were in favor of customer discount (Table 4).

The paper also attempted to find out the level of participation of the sample entrepreneurs at exhibitions and trade fairs organized in the country and abroad.

❖ **Participation In Exhibitions & Trade Fairs**: Exhibitions and trade fairs are important channels for advertising and selling handloom products. Several exhibitions are being organized in India to encourage the handloom weavers. However, it is distressing to note that 40.21 per cent of the sample enterprises in the cluster had not participated in any exhibition at the regional, national or international level. Among the enterprises who had participated (59.79 per cent) in exhibitions, most of them had represented the cluster at the local level in Aizawl. Very few have participated at the regional level, i.e. the North East Region and the national level. None participated in international exhibitions and trade fairs. It speaks volumes on the initiatives taken by the government to represent the handloom products of Thenzawl at the national and international level.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

The entrepreneurs in Thenzawl need to innovate on art, design and technology to produce high value-added products for the local, national and international markets. This requires networking with national institutes such as NIFT and NID. Further, there is an urgent need to provide professional consultancy services in the cluster with regard to technical assistance, designs, quality control techniques and others to enhance competitiveness of the cluster. There is a need to educate the entrepreneurs about quality testing techniques and the establishment of a laboratory in Thenzawl, which may have the required equipment for testing, such as the yarn strength tester, fabric strength tester, glass instruments and chemicals for testing, PH meter and so on. The competitiveness of the cluster needs to be enhanced by the concerted joint action of the facilitating agencies such as MAHCO, Mizoram Handloom and Handicrafts Development Corporation Ltd. (ZOHANDCO), Federation of Mizoram Handloom & Handicrafts (ZOHANFED) and Directorate of Industries (Handlooms & Handicrafts), Government of Mizoram, and the entrepreneurs of the cluster. The Thenzawl Handlooms & Handicrafts Association should be strengthened into a larger federation so as to increase its competitiveness in the local, national and international markets through appropriate linkages with the intermediaries. This could be facilitated through exposure in exhibitions and trade fairs and support in identifying products that could be sold in these markets.

There exist several components under the Marketing and Export Promotion Scheme for the eleventh plan such as organization of exhibitions, events and craft melas, setting up of urban haats, publicity and awareness programmes, acquiring Geographic Indication (GI) and Handloom Mark to support marketing activities of the weavers; which if extended to the weavers of this cluster, it can alleviate the problems faced by the cluster. Moreover, the Integrated Handloom Development Scheme (IHDS), another centrally sponsored scheme formulated under the eleventh plan offers financial assistance to organizations on the basis of sharing between central government, state government and beneficiaries. The State government should initiate the process of adoption of Thenzawl cluster under this scheme to sustain and develop the cluster.

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NOTES

¹ *Chapchar Kut* is the spring festival celebrated in the month of March after the jhum operation i.e. clearing of jungles for cultivation.

² *Pawl Kut* is the harvest festival celebrated in the months of December-January after the harvest.

³ *Mim Kut* is celebrated during the months of August - September after the harvest of maize and the harvests are consecrated to the departed souls.

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