



Empowering Naga Women: Transition of Traditional Weaving into a Sustainable Livelihood

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Abstract: Weaving is a "living language" that documents the history, identity, and social standing of the Naga tribes, it is much more than just a means of producing clothing among Naga communities. In times gone by, women were the only ones who could spin, dye, and weave on the backstrap loom as a means of showcasing their wisdom and adding to the prosperity of the community. This traditional wisdom is currently being investigated as a possible instrument for independent living and economic empowerment. This paper examines the transition of Naga weaving from a traditional craft to a skilled enterprise. Traditional styles are under strain from modernisation and globalisation, but women are using their weaving abilities to adapt to these changes. They are trying to transform an ancient skill into a reliable source of revenue by forming Self-Help Groups and using online platforms to market their services. Nonetheless, there is a persistent worry that the traditional meanings and stories associated with the patterns may be impacted; as weaving becomes more commercial, the original stories and meanings behind the patterns might be affected. Through the research of previous studies and literature, this paper aims to examine the loom's function as a location of "resilience." It looks at the claim that empowering Naga women would be possible through strengthening their weaving skills. this analysis aims to investigate how contemporary weaving techniques enable women to strike a compromise between preserving their tribal identity and creating a sustainable future in an increasingly globalised society.

Keywords: *Naga, Weaving, Women's Empowerment, Sustainable Livelihood, Tradition.*

1. Introduction

The Naga people, who live in the strategically important montane borderlands of Northeast India and Northwestern Myanmar, are a complex ethnic composite of about forty different tribes of Tibeto-Burman ancestry. There is still much scholarly disagreement over the etymology of the term "Naga"; historical accounts point to a variety of origins, from the Tibeto-Burman Nok, which means "folk" or "people," to derivations connected to the Sanskrit Nanga or the Burmese Naka, which refers to the cultural practice of ear piercing (Peal, 1894; Hutton, 1921). The name has been established as a cohesive cultural and political identity in the post-independence age, encompassing a broad geographical "shatter zone" throughout the states of Nagaland, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, and Assam, despite these various external titles (Elwin, 1961). Material culture, particularly textiles, served as the main tool for social documentation in these tribes' "writing-free" past, documenting the community's history, ancestry, and standing (Mills, 1922).

The role of Naga women, whose lives have historically been integrally linked to the backstrap loin loom, is crucial to this cultural preservation. Weaving is much more than just a household task in Naga culture; it is a "gendered expertise" with significant socio-spiritual significance (Aier & Humtsoe-Nienue, 2011). In the past, a woman's skill at the loom was a sign of her morality, intelligence, and social status. Every motif, colour scheme, and stripe on traditional Naga clothing has a particular meaning about a person's bravery, involvement in group rituals, and standing in the tribe hierarchy (Wettstein, 2008). With the completion of particular patterns signifying the achievement of particular social milestones, this "visual vocabulary" guarantees that the textile serves as a living record of the wearer's identity and the weaver's competence (Odyuo, 2013).

Beyond cultural meaning, weaving is significant for traditional economy and long-term survival. In the past, this was a self-sufficient way of life based on the local ecology, using native cotton and natural dyes made from local plants. However, globalisation and the flood of mass-produced, machine-made materials are posing previously unheard-of challenges to these ancient practices as Naga culture navigates the difficulties of the twenty-first century. Weaving is now seen as an organised, sustainable livelihood model that can compete in the contemporary monetary economy, rather than a ceremonial domestic requirement.

The professionalisation of this traditional art is now closely linked to the empowerment of Naga women. Women are maintaining their cultural "visual sovereignty" and becoming the main economic actors in their communities by turning traditional weaving into a skilled business (Longchar, 2025). This shift reflects a calculated compromise between preserving

tribal identity and becoming financially independent in an international marketplace. In order to bridge the gap between ancestral tradition and contemporary economic resilience, this paper aims to present the framework of this shift by examining how the revival of the loom might act as a powerful engine for sustainable development and women's empowerment in the Naga setting.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study utilizes a Qualitative Systematic Review and Thematic Meta-Synthesis. The design focuses on:

- **Synthesis of Secondary Data:** In order to create a new conceptual model of socio-economic transformation, the study examines "data about data," combining information from peer-reviewed journals, doctorate theses, and extant ethnographic records.
- **Analytical Framework:** To find recurrent patterns in the development of Naga weaving from a ritualistic craft to a market-driven industry, the study uses a meta-synthesis technique rather than a straightforward summary.

2.2 Data Selection and Inclusion Criteria

The review follows the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines where applicable to qualitative research. The selection process was governed by the following criteria:

- **Temporal Scope:** To guarantee that the analysis represents the most current socioeconomic changes and digital initiatives in the area, sources were limited to the years 2009 through 2025.
- **Thematic Focus:** Only research that explicitly addressed "Naga textiles," "sustainable livelihood," "gender agency," or "indigenous economic empowerment" was included.
- **Language and Peer-Review:** Only English-language documents from peer-reviewed journals, university archives, and recognized international conference proceedings were considered.

2.3 Sources of Data and Search Strategy

A comprehensive search was conducted across multiple academic and institutional databases to ensure a wide-reaching evidence base:

- **Primary Academic Databases:** Google Scholar, JSTOR, Taylor & Francis, and ResearchGate.

- Institutional Archives: Shodhganga (INFLIBNET) for doctoral dissertations and the University of Hyderabad digital archives.
- Keywords and Boolean Operators: Search strings included combinations of (Naga) and (Weaving) and (Livelihood OR Empowerment).

2.4 Limitation

- Reliance on secondary sources; India-specific scope limits generalizability; no fieldwork → lived experiences indirect. Still provides strong evidence base + future research directions (rural, intersectional).

3. The Socio-Symbolic Framework of Naga Weaving

3.1 *The socio-symbolic framework of naga weaving*

The loom serves as a nonverbal preserving technique in Naga textiles, which serve as complex records of social history and cultural memory. The cloth becomes a "synthetic text" a document that is "read" using both tactile and visual literacy, when there is no conventional written script. Each motif functions as a sophisticated coded story; for example, the academic preference for "broken lines" and precise geometry is seen as a purposeful "technique of not being governed" rather than a lack of skill (Sai B. et al., 2025; Wettstein, 2014). This aesthetic choice marks a visual boundary of ethnic autonomy, where the rigid, angular patterns serve as a semiotic rejection of the fluid, curvilinear aesthetics often associated with state-integrated lowland societies.

These patterns serve as a "second skin," connecting the individual self to a broader "National" Naga identity. Strict semiotic rules govern the "visual vocabulary" of a shawl or wrap, the use of ritualistically dyed red yarns, the inclusion of magnifying figures, or the precise width of a stripe are indicators of social milestones, such as the hosting of the "Feasts of Merit" in the present day or successful headhunting in the past (Odyuo, 2013). As a result, the textile serves as a site of "Visual Sovereignty," shielding the cultural psyche from "desymbolization," which is the process by which sacred symbols are taken out of their communal context and reduced to hollow commodities for the global market.

3.2 *Gendered Praxis and the Sacred Technical Tradition*

Weaving is seen as a type of "praxis," a synthesis of theory and practice that is still only practiced by women. In the past, a woman's main place to exert her agency was on the loom; her technical mastery was not just a household skill but also a necessary condition for social position and marriageability (Yano, 2014). This "gendered expertise" produced a parallel power

structure in which women controlled the "symbolic capital" of the community because they were the only ones who made high-status clothing. The loom was as essential to tribe survival as the spear, as demonstrated by the fact that a woman who could master the most complex designs was rewarded with a status like to that of a victorious warrior.

A "Sacred Technical Tradition," which contends that weaving is a spiritual calling left by the divine rather than just manual labour, elevates this trade even higher. This has its origins in oral mythology, particularly the Legend of Longkongla, who is credited with learning to weave from the complex designs of a spider's web (Odyuo, 2013). The "Sacred Technical Tradition" is governed by these beliefs through a system of taboos and ceremonies, such as the ban on weaving during particular lunar cycles or village gennas (holy days). The weaver guarantees that the "soul" of the garment is preserved by following certain spiritual guidelines. According to recent research, this sacredness is the main cause of the opposition to power-loom; for many Naga artisans, a machine-made fabric is "soulless" because it lacks the "intentional imperfection" and ritualistic intention that characterise handcrafted goods (Fibre2Fashion, 2025).

4. Results: The Pillars of Economic Transition

4.1 From Domesticity to Skilled Enterprise: The Professionalization Pivot

The transformation of weaving from a localised, gendered domestic task into a "traditional and self-sustainable cottage industry" is a significant transition noted in contemporary literature (Raidas, 2024). Middle-aged women who have used their ancestors' skills to create specialised careers are leading this development, which is not just a change in scale but also a shift in the weaver's self-perception from "home-maker" to "skilled entrepreneur." This "professionalisation of the private sphere" has given labour a palpable, previously undetectable market worth. These women have effectively transformed the craft from the outskirts of the home into the hub of the local manufacturing economy by managing production schedules and standardising quality.

4.2 Institutional Catalysts: SHGs and the NSRLM Framework

The emergence of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) under the Nagaland State Rural Livelihood Mission (NSRLM) has acted as a critical institutional catalyst for decentralized production. These groups have fundamentally altered the power dynamics of the textile market by empowering women to transcend the role of "simple manufacturer." Through SHGs, weavers now engage in collective bargaining, micro-finance, and direct inventory management (Imchen, 2025). Empirical evidence highlights that professional weavers operating within these

institutional frameworks can achieve steady monthly incomes—averaging approximately INR 30,000. This financial autonomy is transformative; it acts as a buffer against the "debt traps" of exploitative middlemen and provides women with a "decision-making seat" within the domestic and village councils (Ngukha, 2024).

5. Discussion: The Modernization Conflict

5.1 *The "Desymbolization" Crisis and the Commodity Trap*

A significant "desymbolization" dilemma arises as Naga weaving moves into a globalised market. This tendency happens when motifs that were formerly rich in ancestral histories and sacred communal values are simplified or changed to appeal to the "minimalist" aesthetic tastes of global consumers (Sai B. et al., 2025). This is referred to in the literature as "serrated pressure," in which the need for large-scale manufacturing compels a change from the "slow," ceremonial process to a commodified speed.

When a motif that once signified a specific tribal achievement is reduced to a "trendy pattern" for a cushion cover, the textile risks losing its status as a "living narrative." This creates a tension between cultural authenticity and commercial survival: the weaver must choose between preserving the "visual vocabulary" of her tribe or catering to a market that values the *look* of the craft but ignores its *logic*. This transition threatens to turn a sacred vocation into a hollow commodity, where the physical object survives but its "symbolic capital" evaporates.

5.2 Ergonomic Friction and the Technological Paradox

The "feeling authenticity" of the backstrap loom and the industrial efficiency needed for international export provide a crucial but little-studied conflict (Dutta, 2025). Because it uses the weaver's own body weight to create tension, the backstrap (or loin) loom is special because it produces what designers refer to as "intentional imperfection"—a signature of hand-crafted authenticity that machine-made fabrics cannot match (Fibre2Fashion, 2025).

However this dependence on the body leads to a contradiction in technology. Severe ergonomic strain is caused by the same process that provides the product its worldwide value. According to the research, long-term loin loom weaving causes chronic orthopaedic issues in older craftspeople, especially in the shoulders and lower back. Modern upright looms and power looms provide "ergonomic relief" and increased speed, but they drastically change the fabric's "soul" and texture. This leaves a strategic gap because there isn't yet a broad framework that offers proper support or "hybrid technology" that can speed up manufacturing without compromising the ancestral fingerprints that establish the global equity of the Naga brand.

6. Integrated Research Gaps And Recommendations

6.1 Identified Empirical Voids for Future Research

The systematic synthesis of current scholarship reveals seven critical "Empirical Voids" that form the rationale for further doctoral investigation:

1. The Paradox of Production and Sustainability: While influencers and current trends encourage the "visual display" of Naga clothing around the world (Longchar, 2025), there is a dearth of long-term research on whether the rising market prices of these upscale "slow fashion" items translate into an improvement in the standard of living for grassroots rural artisans.
2. The Legal-Economic Protection Gap: Research on the practical effectiveness of Geographical Indication (GI) tags is lacking, although current literature highlights the possibility of cultural appropriation by industrial power looms in mainland India. The practical enforcement of these intellectual property rights by individual, decentralised weavers is not supported by a legal framework (Wettstein, 2014; Subramanian, 2025).
3. The Institutional "Double Burden" Gap: The majority of research highlights the "empowerment" that SHGs and NSRLMs offer, but it ignores the "Double Burden" that women face. Scholarly research on how Naga women manage traditional domestic and reproductive work alongside professionalised textile manufacturing is lacking, which frequently leads to "time poverty" (Ngukha, 2024; Imchen, 2025).
4. The Semiotic Erosion vs. Commercialisation Gap: Although Vitso (2001) and Sai B. et al. (2025) talk about "desymbolization," no empirical research has been done to pinpoint the precise point at which a motif loses its collective "sacredness" in favour of "marketability." We don't have a "Sustainable Semiotics" model that permits expansion without the "death of the narrative."
5. The Paradox of Ergonomics and Technology: The loin loom's extreme physical strain is documented in current literature (Dutta, 2025; Fibre2Fashion, 2025), but interdisciplinary research involving ergonomic engineering to update the backstrap loom's design without changing the conventional "tension-based" weaving technique is completely lacking.
6. The Digital Divide in Narrative Branding: Although digital platforms are cited as catalysts, there is a lack of empirical data regarding the challenges to digital literacy faced by older weavers in rural areas. There is a gap in the literature about a "inclusive digital transition" for the main guardians of the craft because the majority of it concentrates on young urban entrepreneurs (Yano, 2014; Raidas, 2024).

7. The Entrepreneurial Transition Gap: No theoretical framework exists to help weavers move from "skilled wage labour" to "Global Brand Owners." The path toward "Artisan-Led Global Branding" has not yet been explored in the literature; current interventions frequently retain women in the role of "suppliers" to outside designers (Longchar, 2025; Shitire et al., 2025).

6.2 Strategic Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Based on the synthesized findings, the following recommendations are proposed to bridge the gap between ancestral heritage and modern economic resilience:

- Formalisation of Intellectual Property (IP) Rights: State authorities need to educate grassroots weavers on IP enforcement rather than just acquiring GI tags. To prevent "industrial duplication" of Naga motifs, a decentralised legal assistance cell must be set up (Wettstein, 2014).
- Ergonomic Support System Implementation: Health missions should work with design institutes (such as NID) to implement hybrid ergonomic supports for backstrap weavers in order to reduce chronic musculoskeletal problems and ensure the lifetime of the workforce (Dutta, 2025).
- Digital Storytelling as a Value-Add: Training rural weavers in business-to-consumer (B2C) e-commerce should be the main goal of empowerment initiatives. Weavers can market the "fingerprints of handwork" directly to ethical consumers throughout the world by learning how to employ "Digital Storytelling," which justifies premium pricing (Raidas, 2024).
- Gender-Sensitive Policy Integration: To lessen the Double Burden on professional weavers and make sure that economic empowerment does not come at the expense of physical and mental exhaustion, livelihood missions (NSRLM) must incorporate "social protection" frameworks, such as community-based childcare (Ngukha, 2024).
- Standardisation with Semiotic Integrity: Establish a framework for "Cultural Branding Guidelines" that ensures that "standardising of products" (such as home décor) for international markets respects the sacred hierarchy of motifs and avoids the "hollow commodification" of culture (Sai B. et al., 2025).

7. Conclusion

The evolution of Naga weaving from a ritualistic, gendered home practice to a powerful powerhouse for sustainable livelihood has been systematically documented in this empirical

review. Naga textiles are "synaesthetic texts" and "living narratives" that continue to negotiate the complex intersection of ethnic identity, visual sovereignty, and global market forces, according to a synthesis of literature (Sai B. et al., 2025; Wettstein, 2014).

This study's transition reveals a major turning point, the backstrap loin loom's professionalisation has enabled Naga women to transform their ancestors' "gendered expertise" into material "symbolic and financial capital." The loom has moved from the periphery of domesticity to the center of a decentralised cottage industry because of the institutional support of Self-Help Groups (SHGs). This has reduced the exploitative influence of traditional middlemen and given artisans a steady income of INR 30,000 on average (Ngukha, 2024; Imchen, 2025).

However, there are several structural inconsistencies with this shift. The "desymbolization" of religious motifs and the substantial "ergonomic friction" imposed on the weavers' physical bodies are two characteristics of the "Modernisation Conflict" that the research has uncovered. The identified research gaps—specifically, the "Double Burden" of women and the "Legal-Economic Gap" in GI tag enforcement—indicate that although economic progress is apparent, the framework for safeguarding the intellectual property and overall well-being of artisans is still lacking (Wettstein, 2014; Dutta, 2025).

In conclusion, a strategic "Fusion Bridge" that strikes a balance between commercial scalability and traditional integrity is essential to the empowerment of Naga women through weaving. Policy interventions must address digital literacy, ergonomic modernisation, and the legal protection of visual sovereignty in addition to production quotas if the Naga loin loom is to continue being a sustainable source of income. Naga weaving can serve as a global model for how indigenous communities can interact with the 21st-century economy without compromising the "fingerprints of handwork" that characterise their identity by bridging the gap between ancestral tradition and contemporary economic resilience.

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