



## Documentation of traditional handloom practices in Meghalaya: A case study in Bhoirymbong C&RD block

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### Abstract

Meghalaya, a scenic state in North-Eastern India, is celebrated for its vibrant textile heritage, intricately linked to the cultural and economic lives of its people. Women have historically been pivotal to the handloom sector, a tradition stemming from their ancestral roles in food gathering and agriculture, evolving into the art of weaving. In Ri-Bhoi, weaving is deeply tied to cultural identity, with women passing on skills, creating textiles symbolizing tribal heritage, and finding pride and fulfilment in their craft. Amidst modernization, these practices highlight the resilience and adaptability of communities. Across Northeast India, handloom weaving reflects the harmony of art, architecture, and culture in daily life, with each tribe contributing unique traditions. Research focuses on documenting traditional handloom practices in Ri-Bhoi District, detailing processes involved in textile creation. This effort underscores the ingenuity of women in Meghalaya in preserving and adapting their cultural legacy. Such documentation is crucial for promoting cultural continuity, instilling pride among local communities, and ensuring the survival of this rich heritage for future generations.

**Keywords:** Meghalaya textile heritage, handloom weaving, Ri-Bhoi District, role of women in weaving, traditional textiles, indigenous weaving techniques, cultural preservation

### Introduction

Meghalaya, a scenic state in north-eastern India, boasts a rich textile heritage deeply intertwined with its cultural and economic fabric. The indigenous textile artisans, particularly the Nongtluh women of the Ri-Bhoi district, have preserved traditional methods of textile production, which are central to their cultural identity and livelihood. The deep love for their craft of these artisans, supported by government initiatives and economic opportunities, has played a crucial role in sustaining their traditional textile art (Ramkumar and Dias, 2021) <sup>[1]</sup>. Historically, women in Meghalaya have been pivotal in the handloom sector, a tradition that dates back to when they were responsible for food gathering and sustaining agriculture, eventually leading to the development of woven textiles (Mishra *et al.*, 2021) <sup>[2-9]</sup>. The tribal textiles and costumes of Meghalaya, although facing the threat of extinction, have been documented to understand the changes in yarns, looms, colours, motifs, and costumes worn for different occasions. This documentation highlights the monopoly of women in weaving, who traditionally set up looms in their homes to create their attire (Karolia and Ladia, 2012) <sup>[3]</sup>. Additionally, the silk industry, particularly sericulture, is a significant part of textile sector in Meghalaya. Rural hilly tribal women dominate this eco-friendly cottage industry, engaging in activities from rearing silkworms to reeling silk, with Mulberry silk being the most extensively produced (Borah and Borah, 2021) <sup>[4]</sup>. The diverse topography and favourable climatic conditions of the state also support a variety of agricultural activities, with a significant portion of the population, especially women, engaged in agriculture, which complements their involvement in textile production (Borah and Borah, 2020) <sup>[5]</sup>. Thus, textile heritage of Meghalaya is a testament to the resilience and ingenuity of its women, who have maintained and adapted their traditional crafts amidst changing times. Handloom practices in Meghalaya hold profound significance in shaping and preserving the cultural identity

of its communities. The tradition of weaving in Meghalaya, particularly in the Ri-Bhoi district, is deeply intertwined with the cultural fabric of the region. Women weavers in Ri-Bhoi maintain their cultural identity through the acquisition and exchange of weaving knowledge, securing social support from family and community, and creating textiles that symbolize their tribe and culture, which brings them a sense of fulfilment and pride (Dias *et al.*, 2020) <sup>[6]</sup>. This practice is not only a means of livelihood but also a vital expression of cultural heritage, reflecting the resilience and adaptability of a community in the face of modernization. The broader context of handloom weaving in Northeast India, including Meghalaya, reveals that art, architecture, and culture are integral to daily life, with unique practices of each tribe contributing to their distinct identities (Ravishankar and Ji, 2021) <sup>[7]</sup>. The experience of the Bodo community, although specific to the Bodoland Territorial Region, parallels the significance of handloom weaving in Meghalaya, highlighting the role of indigenous materials and traditional techniques in sustaining cultural heritage (Brahma 2024) <sup>[8]</sup>. Furthermore, the historical role of women in weaving, dating back to primitive societies where they engaged in various crafts, underscores the long-standing association between women and the handloom sector, which continues to empower them and promote their cultural identity (Mishra *et al.*, 2021) <sup>[2, 9]</sup>. The commitment of the Bodo community to preserving their weaving traditions, as custodians of their cultural heritage, mirrors the dedication seen among weavers of Meghalaya (Basumatary and Khawzawl, 2024) <sup>[10]</sup>. Thus, handloom practices in Meghalaya are not merely economic activities but are deeply embedded in the cultural identity and social structure of the region, fostering a sense of community, continuity, and cultural pride among its people. Therefore, the aim of this research investigation is to document traditional handloom practices by taking into account the details steps in the preparation of traditional textiles by the

local inhabitants of Ri-Bhoi District under the Bhoirymbong C&RD Block

**Materials and Methods**

**1. Study area**

The present investigation was carried out in several villages under Bhoirymbong C&RD Block in Ri-Bhoi District, Meghalaya (Table I).

**Table 1:** List of documented traditional knowledge holders practicing handloom in Bhoirymbong C&RD Block, Ri-Bhoi District, Meghalaya

Sl. No	Reference No.	Age	Gender	Village/Block
1.	ML/RB/HL/001	49	Female	Mawbri, Bhoirymbong Block
2.	ML/RB/HL/002	27	Female	Khweng, Bhoirymbong Block
3.	ML/RB/HL/003	72	Female	Umtngam, Bhoirymbong Block
4.	ML/RB/HL/004	40	Female	Umtngam, Bhoirymbong Block
5.	ML/RB/HL/005	44	Female	Umtngam, Bhoirymbong Block
6.	ML/RB/HL/006	63	Female	Umtngam, Bhoirymbong Block
7.	ML/RB/HL/007	49	Female	Mawbri, Bhoirymbong Block

**2. Identification of Traditional Artisan**

Prior to documentation of data, traditional artisan was first identified through previous records and information gathered from the C&RD Block office, other line departments, village headmen and elderly members of the

communities. Additionally, awareness programs and workshops were conducted to identify the potential stakeholders (traditional artisan). Contacts information details of all the identified stakeholders from the above-mentioned sources were gathered. Lastly a Prior Informed Consent (PIC) document was drafted for consent and agreement requirement. This PIC document was then taken to the stakeholders at the time of survey. This document ascertains the willingness of the traditional healer to share the information and has no objections/ reservations to share and submit the same with the data collector. It is only after the consent of the stakeholders to this document that the following documentation works were carried out.

**3. Survey and Documentation of Traditional handloom Practices**

The documentation of traditional handloom weaving practices from 7 traditional artisans of Ri-Bhoi District under Bhoirymbong C&RD Block was conducted using a structured questionnaire (Fig 1). This questionnaire collected detailed data on the profiles of traditional artisans, their livelihoods, sustainable utilization of natural resources, and their traditional methods of weaving and handloom practices. Detailed information on types of materials used and a step-by-step documentation of methods used in preparation of traditional handloom products were documented. The collected data were analysed to identify common practices and individual variations, with a focus on understanding the traditional knowledge and its potential. During the survey, photographs and recorded specimens were collected to ensure accurate documentation.



**Fig 1:** Documentation of knowledge holder practicing handloom; A. Hand-spun thread, B. Tools used in handloom, C. Knowledge holder, D. Finish product

**Results and Discussion**

**1. Overview of Traditional artisans**

Seven traditional artisans were identified during this investigation. Each of these identified artisans were given a unique identification code as per the PIC document discussed earlier to protect their identity (Table 1). It has

been found during our investigations that all the traditional handloom artisans are female members of a community. This finding aligns with broader trends observed in various regions where handicrafts and handloom industries are pivotal for local economies and cultural sustainability. For instance, in Pilkhuwa, India, the handloom industry involves

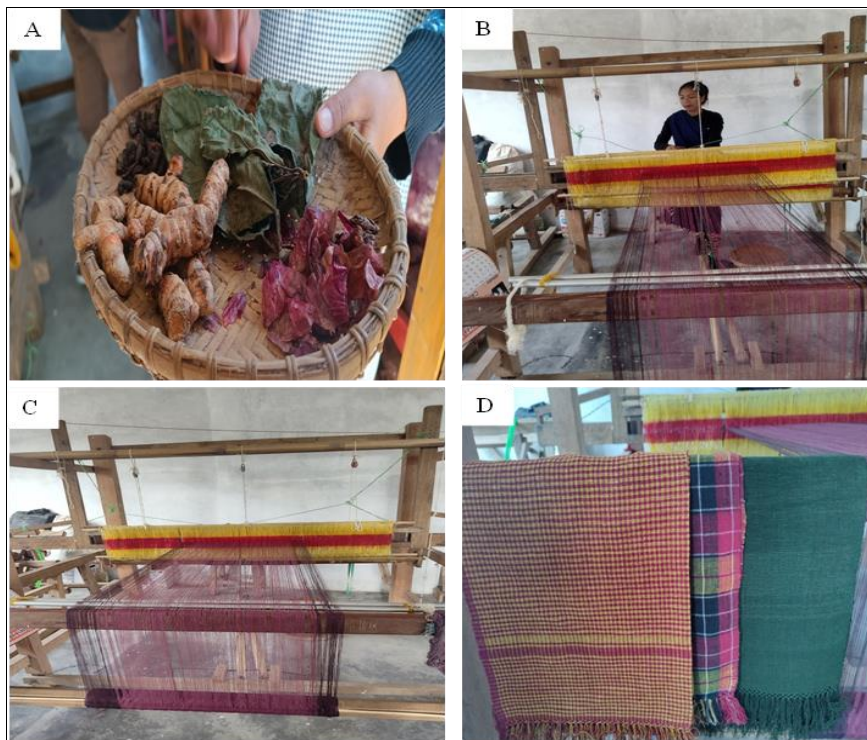


numerous local communities, including women, who contribute significantly to the production and marketing of printed home furnishings, thereby supporting their livelihoods (Upadhyay and Goel, 2020) <sup>[11]</sup>. Similarly, in South Africa, the handicraft sector, which includes a substantial number of female artisans, has the potential to create sustainable livelihoods and alleviate poverty, although it currently suffers from inadequate support (Abisuga-Oyekunle and Muchie, 2020) <sup>[12]</sup>. The role of women in these industries is not only economic but also cultural, as seen in the Scandinavian North, where traditional handcraft practices are integral to cultural sustainability and intergenerational dialogue (Harkonen *et al.*, 2018). The emphasis on handmade authenticity and sustainability in the Indian craft market also reflects a growing recognition of the value of traditional crafts, which are often produced by women, and the need for state intervention in craft certification to enhance market opportunities (Koli, 2023) <sup>[14]</sup>. Overall, the identification of female artisans in this investigation underscores the critical

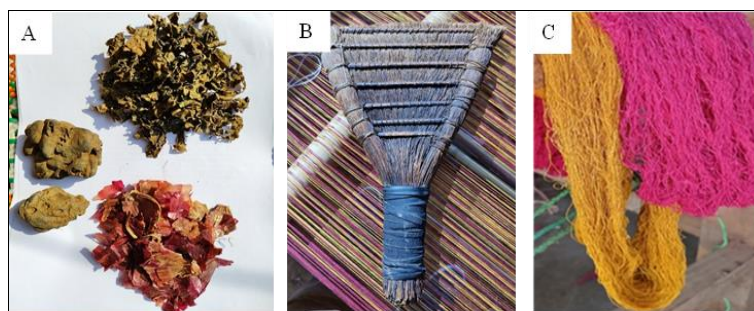
intersection of gender, economic development, and cultural preservation in the traditional handloom and handicraft sectors across different regions.

**2. Raw material used for preparation of various handloom product**

Traditionally, Khasi people obtain Eri silk, known locally as ‘*Ryndia*’, by raising silkworms (Fig 1A). This can be done by skilled craftspeople or local communities. If Eri silk is in short supply, mill-spun thread is bought from the market. Spinning and weaving Eri silk or using mill-spun thread requires several tools: yarn (both hand-spun and mill-spun), a measuring stick, a spinning wheel, and a weaving instrument. The specific tools may vary slightly depending on the craftspeople and materials. Some variations include a brush used in Eri silk production (Fig 3B), a weaving machine made from bamboo and a wooden comb (used with Eri silk or ‘*Ryndia*’) (Fig 2), and a ‘*Jingthain*’ weaving tool used with a handloom.



**Fig 2:** Documentation of knowledge holder practicing handloom; A. Raw-material use as dye for handloom, B. Knowledge holder, C. Weaving machine, D. Final product



**Fig 3:** Dyeing materials and tool used in handloom; A. Raw material used for dyeing, B. Handmade Brush, C. Dyed yarn

**3. Materials used as dye required for the dyeing process**

The traditional artisans used natural dyes for their traditional handloom fabrics. These dyes are created by local and traditional specialists from various plants and minerals like

lac, turmeric, onion peels, iron ore (*eit nar*), lemon juice, banana stem, leaves (eg: *Baccaurea sapida*, *Mangifera* sp.), flowers (eg: *Hibiscus rosa-sinensis*), fruits (eg: *Antidesma* sp.) and bark (*Cordia dichotoma*, *Phyllanthus emblica*,

*Oroxylum* sp., *Ribes* sp.) from specific local trees. It was also documented that the exact mixture used depends on the desired color (Fig 2A). Similar natural dyes have been used by tribal communities elsewhere in the world as shown by several authors (Rahmadina *et al.*, 2024) [15]. This usage of natural dyes is not only a nod to traditional craftsmanship but also a move towards more sustainable and eco-friendly practices in the textile industry, reducing the environmental impact associated with synthetic dyes (Grifoni *et al.*, 2011) [16] (Fig 4).

**3. Traditional methods of Handlooms preparation**

- a. **Degumming:** The cocoons were boiled in water with soap for 45 minutes to 1 hour with continued stirring. The boiling process helped in softening and holding the cocoons together to avoid the fibers from getting entangled during the stirring process. After boiling, the cocoons were then washed in running water and sun-dried. Once the cocoons are dried, they are ready to be spun into yarn.
- b. **Spinning:** Spinning entails transforming a cocoon into yarn (Fig 5E). Selecting clean, dry, and consistently high-quality cocoons was essential for this process. The spinner would grasp the chosen cocoon with one hand while guiding the strand into the spindle with the other hand. Periodically, the right hand would rotate the spindle to wind the yarn onto it. However, hand

- spinning is a slow process and take so much time.
- c. **Dyeing:** Dyeing is done using various natural and locally available raw materials majorly generated from plant parts like leaves, fruits, flowers, and barks as mentioned earlier. It is to be noted that lemon juice was specifically used during the dyeing process in order to retain the color of the yarn (Fig 5 A-B).
- d. **Weaving:** Once dyed, the yarn is hand woven into fabrics by using various traditional tools which is completely hand-made from bamboos and wood that offers the artisans possibilities of increased production. Eri silk or ‘*Ryndia*’ is the most popular yarn used and it is also in highest demand (Fig 5F).



**Fig 4:** Raw material and finish product of handloom; A. Hand spun thread, B. *Ryndia* shawl



**Fig 5:** Documentation of knowledge holder practicing handloom; A. Extraction of Dye from fruits of *Antidesma* sp. and other plant species, B. Dyeing of yarn, C. Drying of dyed yarn, D. Drying of cocoon, E. Spinning methods. F. Knowledge holder showing her traditional weaving method



**4. Estimated cost of the finished garment and materials used**

Different traditional handloom garments produced by the local artisan includes *Jain ‘Tawah’*, Muffler, Shawl/Stoles, ‘*Jainsem*’, Dyed Shawl, ‘*Dhara Jainsem*’, ‘*Jainpin*’ etc. Estimated cost of these finished garments can ranged from Rs. 1000-25000 depending upon quality and the types of materials used (Table II). During this investigation it was also documented that the overall cost of materials for the production of such traditional handlooms garments can range from Rs. 40000-50000 (Table II). Traditional handlooms are often costly due to several factors, including the labor-intensive nature of the production process, the use of eco-friendly and often region-specific materials, and the unique craftsmanship involved. Handloom weaving is a family-based activity that requires significant time and skill, which cannot be easily replicated by machines, thus driving up the cost of the final product (Kartika *et al.*, 2023) <sup>[17]</sup>. Additionally, the fabrics and dyes used are typically environment-friendly and unique to specific regions, further adding to the cost due to the specialized knowledge and resources required (Balaji *et al.*, 2014) <sup>[18]</sup>. Despite their higher cost, traditional handlooms play a crucial role in supporting the local economy. They provide employment to

a large number of weavers and allied workers, particularly in rural areas, thereby contributing to livelihood security and skill enhancement (Balaji *et al.*, 2014) <sup>[18]</sup>. The handloom sector also fosters cultural identity and diversity, which are essential for the socio-economic fabric of the communities involved (Guru *et al.*, 2022) <sup>[19]</sup>. Moreover, the demand for sustainable and eco-friendly products is rising globally, which can be leveraged to improve the market for handloom products, thereby enhancing the income of artisans. Governmental support, similar to the initiatives seen in Lithuania for national heritage products, can further bolster the handloom sector by creating favorable conditions for production and market access (Pareigienė and Ribašauskienė, 2018) <sup>[20]</sup>. Additionally, local enterprises, such as village-owned businesses, can manage and promote traditional markets, thereby increasing consumer satisfaction and boosting the local economy through enhanced market activities and revenue generation (Udjianto *et al.*, 2024) <sup>[21]</sup>. Thus, while traditional handlooms are costly, their production and sale significantly support the local economy by providing sustainable employment, preserving cultural heritage, and meeting the growing demand for eco-friendly products.

**Table 2:** Estimated cost of some traditional handloom products

Sl. No	Types	Estimated Price (Rs.)	Estimated Cost of materials per Year (Rs.)	Estimated time of Completion
1	Jain Tawah	20000	40000-50000	Depending on the types of garments to be produced, the estimated completion time can range from 1 week to up to 2 months
2	Muffler	1000-15000		
3	Shawl/Stoles	1800-2500		
4	Jainsem	12000-20000		
5	Dyed Shawl	3000		
6	Dhara Jainsem	15000-25000		
7	Jainpin	5000		

**5. Traditional Artisans Marketing Approach**

Traditional handloom products are steeped in tradition and craftsmanship, and their marketing reflects this unique heritage. While many artisans focus on sales within their villages, catering to the local needs of the community, a significant portion of their business comes from custom orders. This personalized approach allows customers to directly connect with the artisans and potentially co-create unique pieces. Interestingly, Eri silk, also known as Ryndia, enjoys the highest demand. This luxurious fabric, obtained from locally raised silkworms, is a testament to the skill and patience of traditional weavers. Traditional markets play a crucial role in promoting economic growth and providing a platform for these artisans. However, the success of these markets and the products of local artisans also depends on effective market management and innovation. Enhancements in physical infrastructure, environmental cleanliness, and administrative order are essential to attract more visitors and support the businesses of these artisans (Amalia *et al.*, 2024) <sup>[22]</sup>. Addressing these issues through better market services and support from relevant agencies can further improve the marketing approach of artisans, ensuring that their traditional handloom products continue to thrive both locally and beyond.

The marketing window for traditional handloom products in Ri-Bhoi is strategically timed. Winter emerges as the most favorable season, as the rich textiles provide warmth and comfort during the cooler months. However, sales are not limited to this period. Some artisans cater to year-round

demand, ensuring a steady stream of income. Beyond village markets and custom orders, some enterprising artisans take their craft a step further. They participate in festivals across the state, setting up stalls to showcase their vibrant textiles and intricate designs. This not only broadens their customer base but also serves as a platform to educate a wider audience about the rich heritage woven into every Khasi handloom product. These festivals become a celebration of cultural identity and artistic expression. Our findings are in line with the findings of several authors (Dias *et al.*, 2020; Gali and Anjaneyulu, 2022) <sup>[6, 23]</sup>.

**6. Challenges in the production of handloom products**

Despite the undeniable beauty and cultural significance of traditional handloom products, their production faces several hurdles. Sourcing raw materials presents a significant challenge. Mill-spun yarn, essential for certain textiles, is unavailable locally and requires trips to Guwahati. Furthermore, the seasonal nature of some dyeing ingredients restricts their availability, forcing artisans to carefully plan production cycles. Acquiring Eri silk, or ‘*Ryndia*’, can be another obstacle. Disruptions in the supply chain or fluctuations in silkworm breeding can lead to production delays. Beyond raw materials, marketing finished goods can be difficult, particularly for artisans who depend solely on customer orders. The lack of a dedicated shop or consistent sales platform can make it challenging to reach a wider audience.

To address the challenges in the production of handloom products, a multifaceted approach is necessary. Firstly, improving the supply chain for raw materials is crucial. Establishing local hubs for mill-spun yarn and seasonal dyeing ingredients can mitigate the need for long trips and careful production planning. For instance, creating a centralized space like the proposed heritage hub in Gazipur Sadar, Bangladesh, could serve as a model for other regions, providing a dedicated area for artisans to access raw materials and exhibit their products (Sharmin and Hossain, 2020) <sup>[24]</sup>. Additionally, the Indian handloom sector could benefit from enhanced marketing strategies and financial support to compete with multinational textile corporations and power looms, which often overshadow traditional weavers (Mukhopadhyay, 2022; Poongodi *et al.*, 2021) <sup>[25, 26]</sup>. Implementing Geographical Indication (GI) tags can protect the unique identity of handloom products, ensuring that artisans receive due recognition and economic benefits (Menon and Vasanthakumari, 2024) <sup>[27]</sup>. Furthermore, fostering entrepreneurial skills among weavers can help them better manage their businesses and navigate market demands (Poongodi *et al.*, 2021) <sup>[26]</sup>. Government initiatives like the "Make in India" campaign can also play a pivotal role in revitalizing the handloom industry by prioritizing it in national economic planning and providing necessary infrastructure and policy support (Nitesh, 2024) <sup>[28]</sup>. Lastly, addressing the socio-economic conditions of weavers, such as improving wages and working conditions, can encourage the younger generation to continue this traditional craft, ensuring its sustainability and growth (Poongodi *et al.*, 2021) <sup>[26]</sup>. By combining these strategies, the handloom industry can overcome its current challenges and thrive in the modern market.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, this research on traditional handloom practices in Meghalaya illuminates the cultural significance, economic empowerment, and ongoing need for support surrounding this art form. The study highlights the crucial role women weavers play as guardians of this heritage, ensuring its survival across generations. Their artistry not only strengthens the cultural identity of communities but also contributes meaningfully to both household and regional economies. Furthermore, this study underscores the importance of documenting these traditions to foster a deeper appreciation for the intricate skills involved. Ultimately, the research underscores the necessity for continued recognition and support from both governmental and non-governmental organizations. This will ensure the survival of this valuable cultural heritage and empower the women who continue to keep it alive.

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### Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there are no known financial or any other conflict of interest.

### Data availability

All data depicted in this case study will be made available upon request.

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